

1/24/22 Monday

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Texas Woman Tries to Buy Another's Baby at Walmart for Half a Million Dollars
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A woman was arrested in eastern Texas last week on charges she had attempted to buy another woman's infant child - a felony offense in the Lone Star State.

According to local news reports, a woman in the city of Crockett, Texas, recently attempted to pressure a new mother into selling her baby for \$500,000.

[The Messenger](#), which viewed the police report filed on the incident, said that Rebecca Lanette Taylor, 49, approached a woman in the checkout line at the Walmart location in Crockett on January 13 and "began commenting on her son's blonde hair and blue eyes. She asked how much she could purchase him for," the report said, with Taylor adding that she had wanted to buy a baby for a long time.

Initially, Taylor offered just \$250,000, which she said she had in her car, but after the baby's mother said her child wasn't for sale at any price, she began to press the issue.

According to the report, Taylor and an unnamed female friend asked about the baby's name, but even though the mother refused to tell them, they already seemed to know it.

The incident continued in the parking lot, where Taylor followed the woman to her car and upped the asking price to \$500,000.

Taylor began screaming at the mom, saying if "she wouldn't take \$250,000 for him, then she would give her \$500,000 because she wanted him and she was going to take him," the report stated.

The mother put the child in her car and locked the door, waiting until after Taylor left before filing a police report. After taking her report and viewing surveillance footage from the store, Houston County Police officers arrested Taylor on a charge of [attempted sale or purchase of a child](#), a third-degree felony offense, with a bail of \$50,000. The maximum penalty she could face is 10 years in prison and a fine of \$10,000.

While attempts to buy someone else's child are rare, there have been several incidents in recent years of people attempting to sell their own children. In one [incident in Kentucky](#) in 2019, a woman tried to sell her child to a family member, while in 2008, [a Mississippi woman](#) tried to sell her grandchild for \$2,000 and a car.

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Burkina Faso's Military Announces Constitution Suspended, Government Dissolved After Kabore's Arrest
By - Morgan Artyukhina

On Sunday, heavy gunfire was reported in Burkina Faso's capital, following by the arrest of President Roch Marc Christian Kabore by the Burkinabe Armed Forces.

The Burkinabe military announced a complete lockdown of the West African country on Monday and the erasure of the government. The measures included closure of the borders and suspension of the country's constitution, as well as the dissolution of the government, the National Assembly and Kabore's office.

They also announced a curfew from 9pm until 5am across the country.

The statement added that Kabore and [the others arrested](#) were in a safe location and that the coup had been bloodless. It added that Kabore had been unable to unite the country in the face of challenges.

The statement was attributed to Lt Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, but read on television by Capt. Sidsore Kaber Ouedraogo.

The military said the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration would work to establish a calendar "acceptable to everyone" for holding new elections, but gave no further details.

African international institutions, including the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have [condemned the takeover](#) and called for national dialogue. In a statement on Monday evening, the US State Department said it was still "too soon" to characterize developments in Burkina Faso, calling it a "fluid situation" and urging all parties to seek dialogue.

It is the [second coup](#) in Burkina Faso in seven years, following a 2015 attempt to grab power by Gilbert Diendéré, the former military aide to the longtime Burkinabe ruler [Blaise Compaore](#).

However, the coup was quickly defeated by mass protests. Months later, Kabore won national elections, becoming the country's first non-interim president in 49 years not to be connected to the military.

Fury Over Islamist Insurgency

For the past seven years, Ouagadougou has struggled against an insurgency by Muslim extremist groups in the country's north with ties to Daesh* and other terrorist groups which have killed more than 2,000 people and sent 1 million fleeing to safety. The Burkinabe government has worked with French forces under the aegis of [Operation Barkhane](#) to fight back, but they have proven unable to make substantial gains and 2021 was one of the deadliest years ever. In November, a large French convoy on its way to Mali as part of Paris' [new, smaller mission](#) in the tri-border region dubbed Task Force Takuba was [met by extensive protests](#) across Burkina Faso and Niger. The French [shot their way out](#) of several demonstrations.

Kabore [fired his entire government](#) in December in an attempt to placate growing discontent, especially among the military, but nonetheless, [eight soldiers](#) were arrested earlier this month on charges they planned to "destabilize" the country's institutions.

On Saturday, mass protests in Ouagadougou demanded Kabore resign, although the [Associated Press reported](#) that many demonstrators also carried a message of solidarity with neighboring Mali, which has been [sanctioned by ECOWAS](#) following a military coup there last year by disgruntled officers as well. Security forces fought with protesters [using tear gas](#), and gunfire was also reported.

The following day, [intense gunfire](#) was reported at several military bases around the capital, but Defense Minister [Barthelemy Simpore denied](#) a coup was underway or that soldiers had detained Kabore.

Who is Col. Damiba?

Lt Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba has emerged as the head of the military coup and becoming de facto leader of the country after Kabore's arrest and the abolition of his government.

According to [Le Nouvel Afrik](#), Damiba was appointed to a military command in the country's third military region by Kabore in December. He previously held commands in Sahel and North regions between 2015 and 2019.

Damiba has strong links to France, the former colonial ruler of Burkina Faso, and is a graduate of a Paris military academy with a defense expert certification in management, command and strategy.

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Lithuania Prepares to Sell Former CIA 'Extraordinary Rendition' Site Where Abu Zubaydah Was Tortured

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Lithuanian government said it will soon put on the market a barn where it once allowed the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to torture kidnapped terror suspects.

The CIA once called it "Project No. 2" or "Detention Site Violet" - a steel barn located in the forest outside the Lithuanian capital with 10 windowless, soundproof rooms, where suspected terrorists were secretly taken to be interrogated and tortured. Now, the Lithuanian government is looking to sell the property for an undecided price, [Reuters reported](#).

"This was a heavily guarded building where one could do whatever you want. What exactly was going on there, we did not determine," Arvydas Anusauskas, who led a Lithuanian parliamentary investigation into the site in 2010, told the news agency. However, Vilnius has [never admitted](#) the structure was Site Violet.

Between February 2005 and March 2006, the [CIA used the building](#) as a black site for its "extraordinary rendition" program - a fancy name for kidnapping people and torturing them for information about al-Qaeda* or other terrorist groups as part of its Global War on Terror. Conditions faced by prisoners there included being shaven on arrival, blindfolded or hooded and legs shackled the entire time they were there, being held in solitary conditions and being exposed to constant light and high-intensity noise. Needless to say, people who disappeared to these sites had no access to a lawyer, judge, monitoring body, or any kind of due process of law. Among those known to have been rendered to the site were Khalid Sheik Mohammed, who was named as "the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks" in the 9/11 Commission Report; Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, alleged to be the mastermind of the 2000 USS Cole bombing; Mustafa al-Hawsawi, alleged to have financially facilitated the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks; and Abu Zubaydah, who was once accused of being a senior al-Qaeda member, although the US government [has now admitted](#) he was never a member, and who has never been charged with a crime.

The site was closed after the Lithuanian government refused to admit Hawsawi to a hospital, [according to CIA cables](#). All four [remain in US detention](#) at US Naval Station Guantanamo Bay. In 2018, the European Court of Human Rights [ordered the governments](#) of Lithuania and Romania, where another CIA black site was located, to pay Zubaydah and Nashiri €100,000 each in restitution for violating the European Union's prohibition on torture.

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State Department: US Prepared to Meet 'Directly' With Iran Amid Talks Standoff
By- Morgan Artyukhina

Iranian diplomats met with P4+1 representatives in Vienna on Monday to review draft texts on guarantees and verification for the removal of US sanctions in the event the 2015 nuclear deal is revived.

"We are prepared to meet directly" with Iran to resolve talks on reviving the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has so far been negotiated by Eurasian partners on Washington's behalf, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"We have long held the position that it would be more productive to engage with Iran directly, on both JCPOA negotiations and other issues. This extends to bilateral and multilateral formats," the spokesperson added.

Earlier on Monday, a Western diplomatic source told Reuters that Iran's negotiating team had recently made an appeal for direct talks.

"We've heard nothing to that effect. We'd welcome it," US Special Representative to Iran Robert Malley, who headed the US delegation that agreed to the 2015 deal, [told Reuters in response](#) to a question about the appeal.

"Reports saying that Iran and the US are directly negotiating with one another are untrue," Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told reporters in Tehran earlier on Monday.

"However, if we get to a stage where reaching a good deal with strong guarantees necessitates direct talks with the US, we will consider it."

The 2015 deal saw the US lower decades-old sanctions against Iran in exchange for Tehran accepting strict limitations on its nuclear program, including on the quality and quantity of refined uranium it could produce and store. However, in 2018, the administration of then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled out of the deal, claiming Iran had been secretly violating it in pursuit of a nuclear weapon. Iran denied the accusations and the other partners to the deal were unconvinced by Washington's evidence, but they acquiesced to US demands to comply with new ["maximum pressure" sanctions](#).

In response, Tehran began reducing its commitments to the deal, producing higher purities of refined uranium and storing more of it, while continuing to disavow nuclear weapons.

New talks on reviving the deal began in early 2021 after US President Joe Biden took office, but after seven rounds in Vienna, no new deal has yet been struck. However, [several draft texts](#) have been agreed upon thus far, with talks on more [resuming in Vienna](#) on Monday between

Iran and the P4+1 nations - the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China - which are also party to the deal.

However, on Monday, Malley introduced a new condition for a final agreement that was totally unconnected to the nuclear deal: the freeing of four US citizens allegedly being held in Iranian custody.

"They're separate and we're pursuing both of them. But I will say it is very hard for us to imagine getting back into the nuclear deal while four innocent Americans are being held hostage by Iran," [Malley told Reuters](#).

In response, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Saeed Khatibzadeh dismissed](#) such a precondition, saying, "the negotiations are complicated enough. One should not further complicate them."

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US Stocks Dramatically Cut Losses After Dow Jones Plummeted Over 1,000 Points
By - Evan Craighead

US stocks experienced a sharp decline on Monday as investors continued to part with assets that may be subject to forthcoming Federal Reserve policy changes. At one point, the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost more than 1,000 points, and the S&P 500 briefly entered into correction territory before rebounding later in the afternoon.

After hours of trading in red, US stocks made a comeback by Monday's close, with the S&P 500 finishing higher at 0.3%, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average seeing a 101-point (0.3%) increase. Monday broke a 6-day streak of losses for the S&P.

Tesla and chipmaker Nvidia both fell by over 4% in the S&P 500's tech sector. Moderna led the index's losses, dropping over 8%.

The tech stock sell-off appeared to bleed into the cryptocurrency markets, where Bitcoin dipped to less than \$33,000, less than half of the cryptocurrency's November 2021 market value.

The market plunge has been attributed to investor fears that the US Federal Reserve will soon announce groundwork for an interest rate hike intended to combat surging inflation.

With inflation running at a 40-year high, the Federal Reserve is gearing to tighten monetary policy and will likely raise interest rates several times in 2022. The Federal Reserve chairman, Jerome Powell, is expected to signal a rise in interest rates following the Wednesday conclusion of the Fed's two-day meeting.

Americans could see rates rise as soon as March.

The CBOE Volatility Index (VIX), Wall Street's "fear gauge," reached its highest level since November 2020. CNBC noted that such a rise is typically followed by market snap-back, if only temporary.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki downplayed the plunge, telling reporters that the White House focuses on "trends in the economy, not any one day and any single indicator."

"Unlike his predecessor, the president does not look at the stock market as a means by which to judge the economy," Psaki said, taking a jab at former US President Donald Trump.

Investor insecurity has also been linked to Western fears of Russian forces invading Ukraine. In recent days, the US State Department has instructed families of American diplomats to leave the country, and the White House is mulling the deployment of thousands of US troops already on "alert."

The Kremlin has repeatedly rejected accusations of a preplanned offensive operation against Kiev. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharov noted that the US and other Western powers view Ukraine "as an instrument of influence" to destabilize the region.

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'Stupid Son of a B***h': Hot Mic Catches Biden Slamming Fox News' Peter Doocy Over Inflation Query

By - Evan Craighead

As inflation surges at a 40-year high, the US Federal Reserve is projected to counter the rise via a policy framework that will likely call for monetary tightening measures on interest rates. Fed chair Jerome Powell warned this month that inflation poses a "severe threat" to the labor market recovery and sustained economic expansion in the US.

During the final moments of US President Joe Biden's Monday afternoon news briefing, Fox News' Peter Doocy was permitted to ask Biden a question in regard to the event, billed as a discussion on how to lower consumer prices for working American families.

"Will you take a question on inflation then," Doocy asked among the chorus of questioning reporters being ushered out of the White House East Room.

"Do you think inflation is a political liability ahead of the midterms?" the Fox News reporter posed.

"That's a great asset—more inflation," Biden said facetiously, as Doocy made his exit.

"What a stupid son of a b**ch," the US president muttered into the mic.

Biden's colorful remarks were not redacted from the [White House transcript](#).

"I think the president is right, you are a stupid SOB," quipped Fox News' Jesse Watters to Doocy, who did not appear to take Biden's remarks too seriously.

"Nobody has fact-checked him yet and said it's not true," Doocy responded with laughter.

Biden has since contacted the Fox News reporter to apologize and clarify that his profane remark was "nothing personal." Doocy confirmed the call during his evening appearance on Sean Hannity's opinion show.

Doocy is no stranger to having his questions lobbed back at him, as he and White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki routinely have tense exchanges, [including a December 2021 briefing](#) in which he questioned whether Biden believes he should be held to the same standard as former US President Donald Trump in regard to COVID-19 deaths.

"I think the fundamental question here is what are you doing to save lives and protect people?" Psaki fired back at Doocy, son of "Fox and Friends" host Steve Doocy, who has been with the Fox News Channel since 1996.

She then noted that there is a "pretty stark difference" in how the pandemic is being handled by Biden, who relies on the advice of medical professionals, versus Trump, who publicly spread COVID-19 misinformation while holding office, and only recently did an about face, publicly supporting COVID-19 vaccines and boosters.

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Netanyahu Refuses to Accept Israeli AG's 'Moral Turpitude' Clause in Corruption Case Plea Deal

By - Evan Craighead

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is presently negotiating a plea deal in a corruption case led by the Israeli Attorney General's office. Recent reports have suggested that the AG's plea deal would likely include a clause that would temporarily bar, or permanently ban, the leader of the opposition from returning to politics.

Netanyahu, chairman of the Likud Party, issued a statement this week clarifying that he and his legal team have yet to reach an agreement with Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, despite media reports suggesting otherwise.

According to Israeli media reports, Mandelblit is negotiating a deal with Netanyahu's legal team that would include an admission of "moral turpitude," which is accompanied by a seven-year ban from Israeli national politics.

"In recent days, false claims have been published in the media about things I allegedly agreed to, for instance the claim I agreed to moral turpitude," Netanyahu said in a statement. "That is simply incorrect."

The embattled politician went on to declare that he "will continue to lead Likud," signaling that he has no intention of departing politics on his own accord.

Israeli officials, including Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, have publicly spoken out against Netanyahu being offered a plea deal after attempting to cast doubt on Israel's court system in the wake of his indictment.

"The man who worked to destroy the public's trust in the foundations of democracy for personal reasons is not eligible for deals," Horowitz tweeted.

Netanyahu, who served as Israeli PM from 1996 to 1999, and again from 2009 until 2021, is now the leader of the Likud, the largest political opposition party in the Knesset. At the same time, several politicians are attempting to secure Netanyahu's role, in the event he leaves.

The former PM is accused of repeatedly accepting improper gifts and soliciting the trade of regulatory favors for favorable coverage from media moguls.

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Cardiac Combo: Peloton Perturbed as Another Fictional TV Character Using Bike+ Endures Heart Attack

By - Evan Craighead

On Sunday, the season premiere of Showtime's "Billions" featured David Costabile, 56, portraying Mike Wagner, or Wags, a middle-aged man seen exercising on his stationary Peloton bike prior to suffering a heart attack. While Wags did not have the same fate as Mr. Big in the "Sex and the City" reboot, Peloton does not seem amused by its inclusion.

In a Monday response to the "Billions" season premiere, Peloton asserted that although the company is aware of its brand's social clout, television shows should not provide misleading details about the company, its products, and also its trainers.

"We get why these fictional TV shows would want to include a brand that people love to talk about, but Showtime's use of Peloton's Bike+ and reference to a Peloton Instructor was not a brand, product, or instructor placement, and we did not agree for our brand and IP to be used on this show or provide any equipment," a spokesperson for the US-based exercise equipment company told The Hill.

They went on to note that, as shown in the episode, there are immense benefits associated with cardio exercise, including a longer, happier lifespan.

While Wags was hospitalized on the TV show, the character did make a recovery, unlike Mr. Big, who abruptly suffered a fatal heart attack in the beginning of "And Just Like That..." the "Sex and the City" reboot on HBO Max.

While Peloton stocks slumped around the reboot's premiere, the company took it in stride and even responded by putting Mr. Big actor Chris Noth in a commercial that has since been pulled amid a slew of sexual misconduct allegations.

"Mr. Big lived what many would call an extravagant lifestyle — including cocktails, cigars, and big steaks — and was at serious risk as he had a previous cardiac event in Season 6," Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum, a member of a Peloton health and wellness council, told the LA Times. "These lifestyle choices and perhaps even his family history, which often is a significant factor, were the likely cause of his death."

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At Least 6 Dead After Stadium Crush Unfolds in Cameroon Before African Cup of Nations Match

By - Nevin Brown

At least six people died following a stadium crush in Cameroon's capital city of Yaounde on Monday. The crush happened ahead of Cameroon's round of 16 match against Comoros Islands in the African Cup of Nations (AFCON). Cameroon is the host nation for the tournament. Six people have been confirmed dead, but according to Naseri Paul Biya, governor of the central region of Cameroon, there could be more.

"We are not in position to give you the total number of casualties," he earlier said.

[According to witnesses](#), children were among the victims. The claim is that the crush happened when stadium stewards closed the gates to Olembe Stadium and stopped people from going in. Graphic photos from the scene captured several individuals lying on the ground as others were being given first aid.

At least 40 people arrived at the Messassi hospital as a result of the crush. The situation is dire, according to nurse Olinga Prudence.

"Some of the injured are in desperate condition," she said. "We will have to evacuate them to a specialized hospital."

Cameroon had originally been slated to host AFCON in 2019, but concerns over their readiness and the safety of their stadiums caused the tournament to be moved to Egypt. One of the stadiums of concern was Olembe Stadium.

Cameroon authorities, following poor turnout for the opening round of matches, organized mass transportation and gave out free tickets to improve the atmosphere of matches.

An estimated 50,000 people attended the match at Olembe Stadium. Its max capacity is 60,000, but due to Covid restrictions, it could only be filled up to 80% capacity.

Cameroon is hosting AFCON for the first time in 50 years. In the years since they have won five AFCONs and qualified for the World Cup seven times, the most of any African nation.

Cameroon defeated the Comoros Islands by a score of 2-1 to advance to the quarterfinals where they will face Gambia.

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Lone Gunman at German University Identified by Authorities as 18-Year-Old Biology Student
By - Nevin Brown

On Monday, a lone gunman opened fire in a lecture hall at the University in Heidelberg in Germany, wounding three and killing one, before fatally shooting himself. Authorities have identified the assailant as an 18-year-old biology student at the school.

The attacker had purchased two guns abroad, according to Mannheim police chief Siegfried Kollmar, who added that he could not say in which country the firearms were purchased, as it could impede the ongoing investigation.

The shooter, who reportedly used a rifle to carry out the attack, had no previous criminal record. Authorities have ruled out a political or religious motivation for the shooting. Police have searched the assailant's residence in the nearby city of Mannheim, but a motive has yet to be determined.

The shooting occurred around midday in Heidelberg. Four individuals were wounded and one later died from her injuries, according to the interior minister of the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg Thomas Strobl.

In the past 100 years there have been six school shootings in Germany - the last of which occurred at a secondary school in 2009.

Heidelberg University, established in 1386, is the oldest university in Germany, and one of the most prestigious universities in Europe. The city of Heidelberg has a population of approximately 160,000, of which about a quarter are students.

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Georgia Judge Approves DA's Special Grand Jury Request for Trump Election Interference Probe

By - Nevin Brown

A Georgia judge has approved Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis' request for a special grand jury to investigate allegations of election interference by Donald Trump following his 2020 loss in the US presidential election.

The request was submitted last week and approved by Christopher S. Brasher, Chief Judge of the Superior Court of Fulton County, on Monday, January 24, 2022.

The special grand jury will allow the DA to gather evidence and compel witnesses to testify in their investigation into claims that Trump attempted to overturn the 2020 US presidential election results in Georgia. The investigation will be supervised by the Honorable Robert C.I. McBurney.

Willis wrote [in her request for the approval of a special grand jury](#) that her office, "received information indicating a reasonable probability that the State of Georgia's administration of elections in 2020, including the State's election of President of the United States, was subject to possible criminal disruptions."

The need for a special grand jury was deemed necessary due to witnesses and evidence being hard to come by without the powers of the court, according to Willis.

"We have made efforts to interview multiple witnesses and gather evidence, and a significant number of witnesses and prospective witnesses have refused to cooperate with the investigation absent a subpoena requiring their testimony," she wrote in her letter to the court.

The investigation began when an audio recording of Trump asking Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to find the votes necessary to flip the state from Joe Biden was revealed.

Trump has defended the phone conversation, [saying](#), "I didn't say anything wrong in the call, made while I was President on behalf of the United States of America, to look into the massive voter fraud which took place in Georgia," he would later refer to it as a "perfect phone call."

Clark D. Cunningham, a Georgia State law professor, suggested that the decision is "extremely significant."

A special grand jury provides investigators unique investigative powers that "no other entity in the country has right now in relation to this issue," according to Cunningham.

Willis will have the power to issue subpoenas to individuals inside and outside the state of Georgia as well.

Willis' subpoena power could yield better results than those carrying out the congressional investigation. "The fact that this is a criminal investigation may give it a much higher priority

than, for example, the work of the congressional January 6 committee," Cunningham suggested.

The investigation is likely to begin May 2022 and is expected to not last longer than 12 months.

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Head of Anne Frank Fund Calls New Claims of Family's Betrayal 'Full of Errors'

By - Nevin Brown

John Goldsmith, head of the Anne Frank Fund, slammed the bombshell conclusion of a new book, "The Betrayal of Anne Frank: A Cold Case Investigation," that claims Jewish notary Arnold van den Bergh told the Nazis where the Franks were hiding, as "full of errors" and a "conspiracy theory."

The conclusion that Arnold van den Berg revealed to the Nazis where the Frank family was hiding has been met with considerable pushback from experts on Anne Frank, the German occupation of Amsterdam, and his descendents.

Goldsmith's criticisms were especially scathing.

"It contributes not to uncovering the truth but to confusion and in addition it is full of errors," [he told Reuters](#), adding, "This proof just has not been produced. Simply to disseminate an assertion that then in the public discussion becomes a kind of fact borders on a conspiracy theory."

Van den Bergh's descendents are also furious with the author. His granddaughter came to his defense [by recounting](#) how, by how 1944, the year the Franks were found by the Nazis, he and his family were already hiding in safehouses throughout the Netherlands.

Goldsmith and van den Bergh's family's assertions have been supported by a multitude of experts.

The polarizing book is the brainchild of Pieter van Twisk, a Dutch media producer, and reportedly took six years to complete. Van Twisk claimed that he assembled a team of over 20 investigators and asked them to crack the cold case of who had betrayed the Franks in the summer of 1944 as they hid in a secret annex attached to the office building where Otto Frank had once worked.

The investigation was led by Vince Pankoke, a retired FBI detective. The project used modern forensic technology and even artificial intelligence. The story is written in the style of a true crime novel.

While the use of modern technology aided their efforts, it was reportedly a piece of old evidence that led them to their conclusion. An anonymous letter was given to Otto Frank, Anne Frank's father and the only survivor from their secret Amsterdam hideout, in 1945, that claimed that Arnold van den Bergh had betrayed the family.

Otto gave the letter to a Dutch detective in 1963, but it was ultimately dismissed. Van den Bergh died in 1950.

Due to the existence of the note, van den Bergh has regularly been a suspect, but no other evidence has materialized to support the claim.

David Barnouw, who also wrote a book on the Frank cold case, "Who Betrayed Anne Frank?," said that he had ruled van den Bergh out as a suspect because the note was the only evidence of his guilt.

Barnouw wasn't the only expert to take issue with the conclusion made by van Twisk and his crew. [Emile Schrijver, the director of Amsterdam's Jewish Cultural Quarter, said](#), "The evidence is far too thin to accuse someone."

He added, "This is an enormous accusation that they made using a load of assumptions, but it's really based on nothing more than a snippet of information."

Ronald Leopold, the Anne Frank House's executive director, believes the pressure to come to a conclusion is what led to the heavily-refuted verdict.

"They came up with new information that needs to be investigated further, but there's absolutely no basis for a conclusion," Leopold said.

A bit of circumstantial evidence was reportedly the key to van Twisk's belief that van den Bergh was the guilty party. Van den Bergh was once on the board of the Amsterdam Jewish Council, an organization established by the occupying Nazi forces in 1941 to control the Jewish population.

It is believed by some that van den Bergh obtained a list of where Jewish individuals and families were hiding through his participation on the council. No such list has ever been found, although there are multiple mentions of its existence.

An expert on the subject, Laurien Vastenhout, a researcher at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, asked, "Why would the people in hiding provide the Jewish Council with their addresses?"

Leopold agreed that the existence of a list in the hands of the Council was unlikely. "The Jewish Council was under special scrutiny from the occupying forces," he said, adding "it would be very, very risky to keep lists like that."

Van Twisk, the mastermind behind the new book, acknowledges that no lists were ever found, but suggested that the rumor of their existence is enough to support his highly-disputed claims. "Circumstantial evidence is also evidence," he said.

The Betrayal of Anne Frank: A Cold Case Investigation's controversial conclusion has done little to bring consensus to the question it set out to answer. With the cold case fast approaching a century, the answer may never be known.

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Pentagon: No Final Decision to Deploy US Troops to Ukraine But 8,500 Soldiers on 'Heightened Alert'

By - Nevin Brown

The United States has increased the number of troops on a "heightened preparedness to deploy" to Ukraine should the situation warrant it, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby has revealed.

The Pentagon spokesperson revealed during a Monday press briefing that 8,500 troops stationed in the United States have been placed on high alert and are being prepared for deployment to Ukraine, in case the need arises.

The official later added that the US is prepared to deploy troops to Europe within five days, should they be called upon.

Forces already stationed in Europe may also be readied for deployment to other NATO allies in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States.

"This is about getting troops ready... and to make sure we're bolstering and staying unified with the [NATO] alliance.... no deployment orders have been given," Kirby told reporters.

Kirby added, "The bulk would be ground forces...not ruling out intra-theater moves."

The majority of the forces will be for a potential NATO response force, according to Kirby, who also indicated that discussions with NATO allies have emerged that additional forces could be prepared. However, no figures were given.

Kirby further relayed to reporters that "it would be irresponsible" if the US didn't have troops at the ready amid tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

When asked why the Pentagon was doing this now, Kirby said, "It is very clear the Russians have no intentions of deescalating."

Kirby explained what would prompt the US to deploy troops.

"We're mindful of things that the Russians could do that would potentially give us indications of some sort of imminent incursion," Kirby said at the press briefing. "We're not there yet but we're watching for those indicators very closely."

He also added that an activation of the NATO response force would only be done so at the direction of the NATO alliance. "That's a NATO decision," he underscored.

The US has yet to decide on withdrawing US military trainers stationed in Ukraine, with Kirby explaining the situation is continuously being analyzed.

Amid Kirby's briefing, the US Department of State released a concurrent statement that they are open to additional in-person engagements with Russia, should they be useful. "We are open to additional engagement, in-person engagements, should it prove useful, if we think it could be constructive, if we think it should be the next element as we pursue the path of dialogue and diplomacy," department spokesperson Ned Price said during a separate briefing.

The latest developments unfolded after the State Department on Sunday ordered the withdrawal of all family members of staff at the US Embassy in Kiev, Ukraine. Additionally, the weekend also saw claims come out of the United Kingdom that accused Moscow of attempting to install a "pro-Russia leadership" in Ukraine.

The heightened tensions between the US and Russia stem from the US and its NATO allies believing that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is an increasing possibility, and one that has been given no supporting evidence. The US alleges that Russia has stationed over 100,000 troops along the Russia-Ukraine border with the intention to encroach on Ukrainian grounds.

Over the last several months, Russia has repeatedly rejected accusations thrown its way. Most recently, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova [told](#) the Izvestia newspaper that Ukraine is being used by the West as an "instrument of influence."

"Ukraine is perceived by the West as an instrument of influence, of carrying out its interests in the region, destabilizing the situation, endlessly accusing us [Russia]," Zakharova said in an

interview with the Izvestia newspaper. "So they took Ukraine as a platform for experiments, the unfortunate Ukrainian people - multinational, by the way."

The Russian Foreign Ministry had previously blasted the UK allegations as nothing more than "nonsense" claims meant to escalate already tense relations among global powers.

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George Floyd Civil Rights Case: US Prosecutors Give Opening Remarks in Trial Against Former Cops

By - Mary Manley

In April of 2021, former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty on three counts of murdering George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man. The three former officers who were colleagues to Chauvin and present during the murder now face trial for violating Floyd's civil rights during the fatal arrest.

According to the indictment, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao have been charged with deprivation of rights under color of [law](#) for allegedly failing to give George Floyd medical aid on May 25, 2020, as well as failure to intervene in Chauvin's excessive use of force. The jurors, who are mostly [white](#), consist of five men and seven women who were selected on Thursday in a federal court in St. Paul, Minnesota. All three have pleaded not guilty.

"They watched as Mr. Floyd suffered a slow and agonizing death," federal prosecutor Samantha Trepel said in her opening statement on [Monday](#) morning. "When he said 25 times that he could not breathe, the officers didn't lift a finger."

Floyd's [death](#) sparked outrage, protests, and reignited the Black Lives Matter movement. The Minnesota man had worked as a bouncer until he lost his job due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. After purchasing a pack of cigarettes from a Minneapolis corner store, an employee called the police and accused Floyd of giving them a counterfeit twenty dollar bill and being "drunk."

A visual investigation from the New York Times shows a video compilation of Floyd being nonviolent and compliant, but expressing his fear of being put in the back of a police vehicle. Former police officer Derek Chauvin crushed Floyd's neck with his knee for over nine minutes while officers Lane and Keung held down other parts of his body. Videos of the scene showed Floyd was lying face down on the ground saying "I can't breathe," and calling out for his mother. Throughout the ordeal, Chauvin did not remove his knee off of Floyd's neck even after he appeared to go unconscious. Lane asked [twice](#) if they could move Floyd onto his side, to which Chauvin responded, "No." Chauvin had already 17 complaints and was involved in three shootings, one of which was fatal, before his fatal interaction with Floyd.

Walking the jury through a law requiring police officers to intervene when they see a colleague using excessive force, Trepel explained that under the US Constitution, officers are required to protect people in their custody, and failing to do so is a crime.

[Trepel](#) outlined prosecutor's plans for the trial, including officers who will take to the stand and testify that their training includes intervening when a fellow officer uses excessive force, as well

as the knowledge that holding a handcuffed suspect facedown is dangerous. Some of the same witnesses who testified during Chauvin's 2021 hearing will also take the stand.

The prosecutor also honed in on 36-year-old Thao, who was both a veteran officer and Chauvin's partner at the time of the murder. Before Floyd's arrest, Thao had already had six complaints filed against him, as well as a brutality lawsuit in [2017](#) when he and another officer punched, kicked and kneed a Black man, leaving him with bruises and broken teeth.

Trepel has argued that Thao was in a position to see what Chauvin was doing and was told by public bystanders that Floyd was in distress. Thao was holding back members of the public while Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck.

Lane, 38, and 28-year-old J. Alexander Kueng were holding down other parts of Floyd's body, with Kueng pinning Floyd's back and Lane pressing on his legs. Though both were rookies when the murder occurred, Trepel has stated that is not a defense and argues that, if so, their training should have been that much more fresh in their minds.

Incidentally, Lane had just passed his final evaluation to become a rookie officer a few days before Floyd's death. He was the only officer of the four who intervened, and is not charged with failing to intervene because he asked Chauvin twice if they could turn Floyd onto his side, which officers are trained to recognize as a safer position than prone restraint. Lane also rode in the ambulance with Floyd and performed CPR.

The failure to [intervene charge](#) only applies to Thao and Kueng, accusing the two former officers of willfully failing to intervene when they were aware that their colleague Chauvin was using excessive force while restraining Floyd.

However, the failure to [render assistance charge](#) applies to all three of the officers - Thao, Kueng and Lane. The defendants are being held liable for depriving Floyd of liberty without due process, and more specifically in Floyd's case, the right to "be free from a police officer's deliberate indifference to his serious medical needs."

Although the officers had called for paramedics, they made no effort to give Floyd medical treatment [themselves](#), and when EMT did get Floyd into an ambulance, they requested additional assistance from the fire department. Additionally, the officers gave the fire department no information on Floyd or his whereabouts on arrival, delaying the EMTs efforts to help, according to an incident report. Floyd was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital.

All four officers were fired from the Minneapolis Police Department shortly after Floyd's death, with Chauvin charged with a sentence of 25 years in prison. As for the other three officers, there is a wide range of possible sentences as each offense is punishable with a fine, a prison sentence, or both.

Under the statute that bodily injury is involved, sentences could be increased, or result in life in prison, or even the death sentence. However, according to the [New York Times](#), prosecutors are not expected to seek out a sentence that severe.

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Martian Lakes Detected in 2018 May Have Been 'Dusty Mirage' - Study
By - Mary Manley

A study published on Monday leads researchers to believe what was previously thought of as evidence of liquid water was actually just a mirage. Though this finding debunks previous excitement in the ongoing research of life on Mars, the evidence isn't a disappointment to some researchers.

In [2018](#), researchers found what they believed to be evidence of water existing on Mars' surface lying beneath the ice of its south pole. But researchers at the University of Texas at Austin now have evidence leading them to believe that what lies beneath the ice of Mars' south pole are actually lava deposits rich in iron, or possibly dried up riverbeds covered in mineral deposits. An international team of researchers published their findings in the journal [Geographical Research Letters](#), revealing that the reflection of what was believed to be evidence of water actually matched other volcanic plains found all over the surface of Mars.

The study was conducted using a computer model, built by lead author Cyril Grima, to cover the red planet in ice and observe how it changed the radar data. Doing this caused Mars' volcanic plains to look as though they were made of liquid water.

"For water to be sustained this close to the surface, you need both a very salty environment and a strong, locally generated heat source, but that doesn't match what we know of this region," said Grima, who serves as a planetary scientist at the University of Texas Institute for Geophysics.

But Grima is optimistic, believing that these continued discoveries will eventually lead researchers to more information about the history of Mars.

"On Earth, iron-rich lava flows can leave behind rocks that similarly reflect radar. Other possibilities include mineral deposits in dried river beds. Either way, figuring out what they are could answer important questions about [Mars' history](#)," said Grima.

"Although there may not be liquid water trapped under the southern polar cap, there is plenty of water ice on Mars, including in the thick polar caps. The new study hints at Mars' wetter past," he added.

A study conducted in the summer of 2021 also sought to investigate the cause of the unexplained pools of reflective water, arguing that the source was most likely [clay](#). Isaac Smith, who was the lead author of that study but was not involved in Monday's published study, commented on [Grima's](#) findings:

"I think the beauty of Grima's finding is that while it knocks down the idea there might be liquid water under the planet's south pole today, it also gives us really precise places to go look for evidence of ancient lakes and riverbeds and test hypotheses about the wider drying out of Mars' climate over billions of years."

Other recent [studies](#) which have come to light suggest that Mars was actually once a frigid and wet planet three billion years ago, including both an ocean in its northern part, as well as ice caps and glacial valleys.

Though the study may be disappointing for some, Smith and Grima are now working to find water on Mars in an effort to seek out what could be a potential resource for human landings, as well as evidence of previous life forms.

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Russia-Ukraine Conflict Could Further Increase World Energy Costs - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A possible Russia-Ukraine conflict may further raise energy costs for many countries, the International Monetary Fund's First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said Tuesday.

"Consequences for energy markets would likely be a further increase in prices of oil and gas and, therefore, energy costs more broadly for many countries in the world," Gopinath told a live-streamed IMF World Economic Outlook Update.

Crude oil prices have risen more than 10% since the start of the year, partly due to geopolitical tensions over the Ukraine conflict.

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US Warns Sanctions on Russia's Defense, Aerospace, AI, Quantum Computing Technology

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies are preparing to target Russia's defense, aerospace industry, its developments of artificial intelligence and quantum computing technology in the event of escalation in Ukraine, a senior US administration official said on Tuesday.

"The export control options we are considering along with our allies and partners would hit Putin's strategic ambitions to industrialize his economy quite hard, and it would impair areas of importance to him, whether it is artificial intelligence, quantum computing, defense, aerospace, or other key sectors," the official told reporters during a telephonic press briefing.

This is not a complete list, and all options "are very much on the table," the official added.

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Fall of Russian Ruble Shows Severity of West's Potential Sanctions - US Official

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The latest fall of the Russian ruble shows the significance of economic sanctions that the United States and its allies are ready to impose in case of escalation in Ukraine, senior US administration officials said on Tuesday at a briefing.

"Deepening sell-off in the Russian market, its borrowing cost, the value of its currency reflect the severity of the economic consequences we can and will impose on the Russian economy in the event of the further invasion," the officials said.

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Russia Sanctions That US Has in Pipeline Will Take Full Effect Immediately - US Official

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The sanctions against Russia that the United States has in the pipeline will go into full effect immediately and will not be enforced gradually, senior US administration officials told a briefing on Tuesday.

"The gradualism [of the sanctions] is out, this time we start at the top," the officials said, adding that Washington is preparing sanctions with more severe consequences that were not reviewed in 2014.

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US Ready to Impose Export Controls on Russia If Situation Escalates in Ukraine – Official

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The United States is ready to impose export controls on Russia if the event of any escalation in the situation in Ukraine, a senior US administration official said on Tuesday.

"In addition to financial sanctions, which have immediate and visible effect on the day they are implemented, we are also prepared to impose novel export controls," the official told reporters during a telephonic press briefing.

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IMF Expects 3.8% Global GDP Growth in 2023 - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The global economy is expected to slow down its growth to 3.8 percent next year, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in its updated World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

"Global growth is expected to slow to 3.8 percent in 2023," the report said. "Although this is 0.2 percentage point higher than in the previous forecast, the upgrade largely reflects a mechanical pickup after current drags on growth dissipate in the second half of 2022."

The forecast is conditional on adverse health outcomes declining to low levels in most countries by the end of 2022, the IMF said in the report.

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IMF Cuts Forecast for Eurozone 2022 GDP Growth to 3.9%, Down 0.4 Percentage Points - WEO

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) cut its 2022 GDP growth forecast for the eurozone by 0.4 percentage points to 3.9%, according to its updated World Economic Outlook (WEO) out on Tuesday.

"In the euro area, prolonged supply constraints and COVID disruptions produced a less severe revision of 0.4 percentage point," the WEO said.

A 0.8 percentage point downgrade to 3.8% for Germany's 2022 GDP growth, caused by supply chain shocks, was the major reason for such shrinkage, the report read. The IMF also revised 2022 forecasts down for Spain to 5.8% (-0.6 percentage points), Italy to 3.8%, and France to 3.5% (-0.4 percentage points each). In 2023, the eurozone economy will add 2.5% of GDP, half a percentage point more than expected in October, the report noted.

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IMF Reduces China's Growth Forecast to 4.8% in 2022 - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reduced its China economic growth forecast for this year by 0.8 percent to 4.8 percent, the IMF said in updated World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

"The growth forecast for 2022 is revised down relative to October by 0.8 percentage point, at 4.8 percent, with negative implications for trading partners' prospects," the report read.

The IMF explained that disruption in the housing sector has served as a prelude to a broader economic slowdown. In addition, private consumption is likely to be lower than anticipated due to recurrent mobility restrictions and worsening prospects for employment in the construction sector, the report said.

Lower investment in real estate will also contribute to the decline in economy performance, the report added. In 2023, China is forecast to mark a 5.2 percent growth, which is 0.1 percent less than what was expected in October, according to the report.

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IMF Downgrades Forecast for US GDP Growth to 5.2% in 2022 - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) downgraded its forecast for the United States' GDP growth this year to 4 percent from its October forecast of 5.2%, the updated World Economic Outlook said on Tuesday.

At the same time, the IMF upgraded its forecast for the United States' GDP growth for 2023 by 0.4 to 5.6%, the report said.

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IMF Revises Russia's 2022 GDP Growth to 2.8%, Down 0.1 Percentage Point - Outlook

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) downgraded its forecast for Russia's 2022 GDP growth from October's estimate of 2.9% to 2.8%, according to the latest World Economic Outlook.

The 2023 forecast was revised upward from 2% to 2.1%.

Russia's GDP saw a 4.5% growth in 2021, according to the IMF estimate.

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IMF Lowers Global 2022 GDP Forecast From 4.9% to 4.4% - WEO

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised its forecast for global GDP growth in 2022 downward from 4.9% to 4.4% due to pressures caused by the ongoing pandemic, according to its updated World Economic Outlook (WEO), out on Tuesday.

"Global growth is expected to moderate from 5.9 in 2021 to 4.4 percent in 2022—half a percentage point lower for 2022 than in the October World Economic Outlook (WEO), largely reflecting forecast markdowns in the two largest economies," the report read.

Early withdrawal of monetary accommodation, continued supply shortages and other issues in the United States have produced a downward 1.2 percentage-point revision for the US, while in China pandemic-related disruptions induced a 0.8 percentage-point downgrade, it added. "The global economy enters 2022 in a weaker position than previously expected," the report said, noting that rising energy prices and supply disruptions have increased inflation, notably in the United States.

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Pfizer, BioNTech Begin Clinical Study for Omicron-Specific COVID-19 Vaccine

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and BioNTech announced on Tuesday that they have embarked on a clinical study for their Omicron-specific COVID-19 vaccine in adults 18 to 55 years of age.

"Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech ... today announced the initiation of a clinical study to evaluate the safety, tolerability and immunogenicity of an Omicron-based vaccine candidate in healthy adults

18 through 55 years of age. The study will have three cohorts examining different regimens of the current Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine or an Omicron-based vaccine," the statement said.

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RPT - Russian Ambassador Calls Canada Hacking Allegations 'Hysteria,' Western Propaganda

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Allegations of Russia being behind the recent cyber attack on the Canadian Foreign Ministry is hysteria and part of self-produced Western propaganda, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

On Monday, local media outlet Global News said Global Affairs Canada, the country's foreign ministry, was the target of a multiday cyber attack. The outlet, citing unnamed sources, said the Canadian government is concerned the attack was conducted by Russia-linked hackers.

"It is just hysteria, self-produced anti-Russian Western propaganda," Stepanov said. "The embassy in Canada has repeatedly publicly stated that no invasion of Ukraine is planned and attributing some kind of malicious intent to us in the form of cyber attacks is simply absurd."

Russia, he said, is not engaged in any illegal sabotage activities in cyberspace.

"On the contrary, Russia is the leader of international efforts to strengthen cooperation of all states in the fight against threats to international information security," Stepanov said.

"Unfortunately, the situation with the demonization of Russia has gone so far that any event taking place in the world that cannot be immediately identified and attributed to someone is immediately blamed on Russia, because this is a win-win method in the Western media and political circles."

Last week, Canada's Communications Security Establishment (CSE) warned critical infrastructure operators to enhance their defenses against alleged Russian threats, Global News reported.

Tensions between Russia and Western countries escalated recently amid allegations related to Moscow's military buildup near Ukraine. Russia has repeatedly denied Western countries' accusations, pointing to NATO's military activities close to Russia. Moscow's stance is that it does not threaten anyone and has the right to move troops within its national sovereignty.

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RPT - US Prepared to Meet Directly With Iran to Advance Nuclear Deal Negotiations - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to meet directly with Iran to advance ongoing Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said that Tehran may consider holding the direct talks if it helps reach a better deal.

"We are prepared to meet directly. We have long held the position that it would be more productive to engage with Iran directly, on both JCPOA negotiations and other issues. This extends to bilateral and multilateral formats," the State Department spokesperson said. A direct meeting would enable more efficient communication between the US and Iran, which is urgently needed to reach an understanding on a mutual return to JCPOA compliance, the spokesperson added.

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Puerto Rico Mayor Calls Toppling De Leon Statue Ahead of Spanish King's Visit 'Vandalism'

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The mayor of the Puerto Rican capital San Juan, Miguel Romero, said the toppling of a statue of Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon by protesters earlier in the day is an act of vandalism.

"The most important thing at the end of the day is to protect the right of freedom of expression but there's no excuse to justify an act of vandalism on property belonging to the Puerto Rican community," Romero said in an interview with local media on Monday.

Protesters knocked over a statue of Ponce de Leon located in the historic San Juan district ahead of a visit from Spanish King Felipe VI.

The statue was damaged but quickly repaired and returned on display in time for the King's visit, according to media reports.

The famous Spanish explorer led the colonization of Puerto Rico in the 1500s and served as its first governor. Puerto Rico remained a colony of the European nation until the end of the Spanish-American war in 1898.

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Blinken Vows to EU Counterparts Continued Close Coordination Against Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a virtual meeting with the EU Foreign Affairs Council vowed the United States will continue to coordinate with EU partners against Russia on the Ukraine crisis, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken participated virtually in today's EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) at the invitation of EU High Representative Josep Borrell... He emphasized the United States will continue to coordinate closely on next steps to deter Russian aggression with the EU and member states, in addition to NATO, the OSCE, and Allies and partners more broadly," Price said on Monday.

Blinken also briefed European EU counterparts on his meetings with government officials from Ukraine, Germany and Russia last week, Price said.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine amid a buildup of forces near the border have sparked discussions of further US involvement in the European security situation, including by supplying great military aid to Ukraine as deterrence to a potential invasion.

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near Russia's borders are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces on its territory.

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Man Charged in US-Canada Human Smuggling Scheme Released – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A Florida resident charged in a lethal migrant smuggling operation at the US-Canada border was released from jail by a judge in Minnesota, the CBC reported.

Steve Shand, of Deltona, Florida, was arrested and charged after law enforcement picked up seven people near the US border last week, the report said on Monday. Four other people found dead in a field in Manitoba are thought to have been a part of the group, the report added. Law enforcement began a search on both sides of the border and RCMP officers found the bodies of a man, a woman and a baby on the Canadian side of the border. A further search yielded the body of a male teenager. It appears that they died from exposure to the cold weather.

Investigators said the victims are believed to be from India and were part of a larger group of Indian migrants who were attempting to enter the United States by way of Canada. US Justice Department officials say the victims are probably tied to a larger human smuggling operation.

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Top US General, UAE Counterpart Discuss Houthi's Missile Attack on Air Base - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley and his UAE counterpart Lt. Gen. Hamad Muhammad Thani al-Rumaythi discussed Yemen Houthi rebels' ballistic missile attack that targeted an air base near Abu Dhabi, Joint Staff spokesperson Col. Dave Butler said.

"The military leaders discussed the recent Houthi terrorist attacks against the UAE as well as the security environment in the Middle East," Butler said in a statement on Monday. "The Chairman condemned both last night's attack as well as the January 17, 2022 attack publicly claimed by the Houthis."

Milley praised the United Arab Emirates' armed forces for successfully intercepting the missiles, especially a combined effort to prevent inbound missiles from impacting the al-Dhafra Air Base near Abu Dhabi, which houses US service members, Butler said.

Earlier on Monday, the US Central Command said the United States successfully intercepted two missiles launched by the Houthis that were aimed at the air base.

The Houthis have conducted several drone attacks that targeted Abu Dhabi, killing three people and injuring six others. In response, the Saudi-led coalition, of which the UAE is a part, launched a campaign against the rebel group, targeting their warehouses and other infrastructure in Yemen.

Yemen has been gripped by a conflict fought between the government forces and the Houthi movement for over six years. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis have often retaliated by firing projectiles and bomber drones on Saudi territory. The United Nations has described the situation in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

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Afghan Refugee Convicted of Sexually Abusing Child at US Marine Base - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - An Afghan man has been convicted by a federal jury of sexually abusing a 3-year-old girl after both were evacuated in the wake of the Taliban seizure of Kabul, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"A federal jury convicted an Afghan national Friday on charges of abusive sexual contact with a 3-year-old girl," the release said on Monday. "Mohammed Tariq, 24, engaged in sexual contact with the victim while both the victim and Tariq were housed at Camp Upshur, on Marine Corps Base Quantico, following evacuation from Afghanistan," the release said.

US marines, the release added, observed the defendant inappropriately touching the victim's clothing, chest, genitals, and buttocks.

The victim and Tariq were unrelated, although both were Afghan evacuees.

Tariq, who was tried in Alexandria, Virginia, faces life in prison when sentenced on April 26, 2022.

The Biden administration came under fire for the botched evacuation of Afghanistan as the Taliban took power in August, including criticism of the refugee vetting process.

In September, US Congressman Matt Rosendale said he opposes the Biden administration's plan to resettle Afghan nationals in his state of Montana.

The Biden administration has said that Afghan evacuees undergo a thorough vetting process conducted by US intelligence and counterterrorism officials before they are allowed into the United States.

In November, authorities said at least 70,000 Afghans have arrived in the US as part of Operation Allies Welcome.

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Grand Jury Ordered in Probe Into Trump Involvement in 2020 Georgia Elections - Filings

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A US judge granted a request to impanel a grand jury as part of a probe into former President Donald Trump's alleged efforts to overturn 2020 US presidential election results in the state of Georgia, according to court filings.

"The District Attorney for the Atlanta Judicial Circuit submitted to the judges of the Superior Court of Fulton County a request to impanel a special purpose jury for the purposes set forth in that request. This request was considered and approved by a majority of the total number of the judges of this court," Chief Judge Christopher Brasher said in the order filed on Monday.

The decision paves the way for an investigation into Trump's alleged efforts to overturn Georgia election results because he placed a call Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger alleging fraud and urging him to find the votes needed to beat his opponent Joe Biden.

Special grand juries in Georgia cannot issue indictments, but are able to subpoena witnesses and compel the production of records related to their assigned case.

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UPDATE - New York City to Use Face-Recognition to Nab Gun Traffickers - Mayor
(Updates with more details in paras 4-7)

NEW YORK, January 24 (Sputnik) - New York City will use face detection technology to nab suspected gun traffickers and will amend laws to allow prosecutors move gun-related cases faster through the courts to combat the city's gun violence epidemic, Mayor Eric Adams said.

"We will follow up on leads and collect evidence from facial recognition technology and new tools that can spot those carrying weapons," Adams said in a live-streamed announcement on Monday. "We will use every available method to keep our people [safe]."

Adams' engagement comes after Jason Rivera, a 22-year New York City police officer, was shot dead while responding to an incident on Friday. Another officer, Wilbert Mora, 27, was also shot and remained in critical condition as of Sunday, the New York Police Department said via Twitter.

The mayor, who previously served as a captain at the New York Police Department, unveiled what he called a wide-ranging "Blueprint to End Gun Violence" that would put more officers on patrol and give wider powers to prosecutors as well as enable the courts to work at full capacity.

Adams said the Blueprint is not just a plan for the future, but it is also a plan for "right now" given that gun violence has become a public health crisis and the authorities must act despite the variety of causes involved in the increase of gun crimes.

"Our Blueprint to End Gun Violence addresses each one of these causes with both immediate interventions and long-term prevention strategies. It will involve the NYPD [New York Police Department], every city agency, our courts, and the successful anti-violence Crisis Management

System. We are going to involve every community, every precinct, and our state and federal partners," he said.

Adams lamented that the broader New York was the only one of the 50 US states that did not allow detention of suspects who pose an immediate threat to the community. However, he said New Yorkers will see and feel a change quickly under the guidance of his Blueprint.

"We must allow judges to take dangerousness into account. Forty nine other states, as well as the federal government, allow judges to consider a defendant's dangerousness. New York must catch up. Judges must be able to evaluate defenders' criminal history and the circumstances of the alleged crime," he said.

Adams also said the city was looking at raising the age legislation for gun crimes, which he said was being used as a loophole for gang members to demand young people under 18 take the fall for gun crimes that were not theirs.

"My administration is not seeking to punish young people, but when it comes to guns, we must make sure there are consequences," he said. "Far too many men above the age of 18 are victimizing children by forcing them to carry weapons."

New York City has seen a sharp rise in crime, including in shootings and homicides since the spring of 2020, according to media reports that cited 488 murders in 2021 - nearly 200 more than in 2017.

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Meta Says New A.I. Supercomputer to Be World's Fastest by Mid-2022

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Facebook parent company Meta said its newly unveiled artificial intelligence supercomputer will be the fastest in the world by the middle of next year.

"Today we're introducing the AI Research SuperCluster (RSC), which we believe is among the fastest AI supercomputers running today and will be the fastest in the world once fully built out in mid-2022," Meta said in a statement on Monday.

Developing the next generation of AI will require supercomputers capable of "quintillions of operations per second," the release said.

RSC, the release added, will help build new and improved AI models and allow for work across hundreds of different languages.

Meta also said the RSC will help build technologies for the next major computing platform - the metaverse.

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US Stocks Rebound After a Week-Long Selloff on Interest Rate Hike Fears

NEW YORK, January 24 (Sputnik) - US stocks rebounded on Monday for the first time in a week as a selloff triggered by rate hike fears abated, although there was no certainty if a bottom was already in for the market.

Wall Street's Big Tech sector hit seven-month lows earlier on Monday as highly-valued stocks that used to be the darling of investors reeled from the selloff heightened by speculation that Russia could invade Ukraine - a prospect that Moscow has already denied.

By the close, however, stocks regained some investor optimism, allowing the three major US equity indices - Nasdaq Composite, S&P 500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average - to close up for the first time in an week.

Nasdaq, which features technology icons such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, settled the day up 0.6% at 13,855.10. Earlier in the session, the tech-heavy index was down almost 19% from its November record high, putting it on track to a bear market. With the rebound, Nasdaq remains down almost 12% for January, potentially its worst month since October 2008, when it fell 17% at the height of the financial crisis.

The S&P 500 index, representing the top 500 US stocks, closed up 0.3% at 4,410. It remains down 7.5% for January, its sharpest decline since the 13% drop seen in March 2020 right after the coronavirus outbreak.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which represents stocks across US industry, finished the day up 0.3% at 34,364. The Dow remains almost 5.5% lower for January, its largest drop since a 14% tumble in March 2020.

The selloff in US stocks began on January 13 and accelerated in each of the past five sessions as the Federal Reserve prepares to raise US interest rates for the first time since the coronavirus outbreak. The Federal Reserve slashed rates to almost zero with the onset of the pandemic two years ago, and has kept them there since to aid recovery.

In the interim, the central bank has provided a stimulus of more than \$2 trillion via bond and asset buying that combined with trillions more in federal pandemic aid has taken US inflation to 40-year highs. The Federal Reserve now says it may have to execute a series of rate hikes to counter such inflation. All eyes are on what the central bank could announce at its January policy meeting on Wednesday.

"Wednesday is going to be massive," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "The Fed needs to strike the right balance between taking inflation seriously and not wanting to cause further unnecessary turmoil in the markets. Not an easy balancing act when four hikes are already priced in, alongside balance sheet reduction, and some are arguing it's not enough."

The US economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Federal Reserve has projected a growth of 4% in 2022, after an estimated 5.5% for last year.

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Biden Says Meeting With European Leaders About Ukraine 'Very Good,' Achieved Total Unity

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said his virtual meeting with European leaders on the situation between Russia and Ukraine went very well and achieved a "total unity" among them.

"I had a very, very, very good meeting, total unity with all the European leaders. We'll talk about it later," Biden said during a White House event on Monday.

Biden's call with the European leaders lasted one hour and 20 minutes, during which time the parties consulted and coordinated on issues related to the ongoing situation between Russia and Ukraine.

Participants in the meeting included European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Polish President Andrzej Duda and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

"Today, I spoke with European leaders in response to Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders. We discussed our joint efforts to deter further Russian aggression, such as preparations to impose severe economic costs on Russia and reinforce security on the eastern flank," Biden said via Twitter shortly after the White House remarks.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine amid a buildup of forces near their border have sparked discussions of further US involvement in the European security situation, including by supplying more military aid to Ukraine as deterrence to a potential invasion.

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near Russia's borders are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces on its territory as it sees fit.

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Russian Ambassador Calls Canada Hacking Allegations 'Hysteria,' Western Propaganda

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Allegations of Russia being behind the recent cyber attack on the Canadian Foreign Ministry is hysteria and part of self-produced Western propaganda, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

On Monday, local media outlet Global News said Global Affairs Canada, the country's foreign ministry, was the target of a multiday cyber attack. The outlet, citing unnamed sources, said the Canadian government is concerned the attack was conducted by Russia-linked hackers.

"It is just hysteria, self-produced anti-Russian Western propaganda," Stepanov said. "The embassy in Canada has repeatedly publicly stated that no invasion of Ukraine is planned and attributing some kind of malicious intent to us in the form of cyber attacks is simply absurd."

Russia, he said, is not engaged in any illegal sabotage activities in cyberspace.

"On the contrary, Russia is the leader of international efforts to strengthen cooperation of all states in the fight against threats to international information security," Stepanov said.

"Unfortunately, the situation with the demonization of Russia has gone so far that any event taking place in the world that cannot be immediately identified and attributed to someone is immediately blamed on Russia, because this is a win-win method in the Western media and political circles."

Last week, Canada's Communications Security Establishment (CSE) warned critical infrastructure operators to enhance their defenses against alleged Russian threats, Global News reported.

Tensions between Russia and Western countries escalated recently amid allegations related to Moscow's military buildup near Ukraine. Russia has repeatedly denied Western countries' accusations, pointing to NATO's military activities close to Russia. Moscow's stance is that it does not threaten anyone and has the right to move troops within its national sovereignty.

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New York City to Use Face-Recognition to Nab Gun Traffickers - Mayor

NEW YORK, January 24 (Sputnik) - New York City will use face detection technology to nab suspected gun traffickers and will amend laws to allow prosecutors move gun-related cases faster through the courts to combat the city's gun violence epidemic, Mayor Eric Adams said. "We will follow up on leads and collect evidence from facial recognition technology and new tools that can spot those carrying weapons," Adams said in a live-streamed announcement on Monday. "We will use every available method to keep our people [safe]."

Adams' engagement comes after Jason Rivera, a 22-year New York City police officer, was shot dead while responding to an incident on Friday. Another officer, Wilbert Mora, 27, was also shot and remained in critical condition as of Sunday, the New York Police Department said via Twitter.

The mayor, who previously served as a captain at the New York Police Department, unveiled what he called a wide-ranging blueprint to combat gun violence that would put more officers on patrol and give wider powers to prosecutors.

Adams lamented that the broader New York was the only one of the 50 US states that did not allow detention of suspects who pose an immediate threat to the community.

"We must allow judges to take dangerousness into account. Forty nine other states, as well as the federal government, allow judges to consider a defendant's dangerousness. New York must catch up. Judges must be able to evaluate defenders' criminal history and the circumstances of the alleged crime."

He also said the city was looking at raising the age legislation for gun crimes, which he said was being used as a loophole for gang members to demand young people under 18 take the fall for gun crimes that were not theirs.

"My administration is not seeking to punish young people, but when it comes to guns, we must make sure there are consequences," he said. "Far too many men above the age of 18 are victimizing children by forcing them to carry weapons."

New York City has seen a sharp rise in crime, including in shootings and homicides since the spring of 2020, according to media reports that cited 488 murders in 2021 - nearly 200 more than in 2017.

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Iran Pays Dues to UN, Restores Right to Vote in General Assembly - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Iran has paid its dues toward the United Nations' budget and resumed its voting right in the UN General Assembly, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"Iran and a number of other countries paid their dues over the weekend... through various means. And so, they've been removed from the Article 19 list," Dujarric said on Monday. According to Article 19 of the UN Charter, a member state which is in arrears in the payment of its contributions to the United Nations loses its right to vote in the UN General Assembly if the amount of its arrears equals or exceeds the amount of the contributions due from it for the preceding two full years.

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US Shortens Extension of General Licenses for Russia's GAZ Group - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has shortened the extension of general licenses for Russia's commercial vehicle manufacturer GAZ Group, the US Treasury Department said in a statement.

"These licenses were previously extended on December 23, 2020, for a period of one year," the statement said on Monday. "These new licenses are being extended for a shorter period of 90 days."

The Treasury Department said the decision affects transactions and activities necessary to the manufacture and sale of existing and new models of vehicles, components and spare parts, including automobiles, light commercial vehicles, trucks, buses, engines, produced by GAZ Group or by companies it owns.

Also affected are the research, design, development, production, modification, upgrade, certification, distribution, and marketing components as well as the provision or receipt of services and other goods and services, it added.

Last April, the United States imposed sanctions on the GAZ Group but has since issued several general licenses allowing US investors to continue conducting limited transactions with the Russian auto-maker.

The GAZ Group is part of Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska's business empire. The United States targeted the automaker along with Deripaska's companies Rusal and EN+ Group over what Washington has described as Russia's "malign activities" in Ukraine.

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German Chancellor Scholz to Visit United States in February - White House

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking forward to welcoming Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Washington in February, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing.

"We look forward, of course, to welcoming the chancellor [Scholz] here, to the United States in February," Psaki said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Scholz promised that the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis will be met with a collective response by the Western countries.

On Friday, Scholz confirmed that the new German government will continue to pursue the previous cabinet's policy on the non-supply of weapons to Ukraine, causing a wave of criticism from Kiev.

The announcement came after reports that Germany is blocking its NATO ally Estonia from transferring German-made military equipment to Ukraine as the latter seeks to bolster its armed forces against Russia.

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US Calls for Immediate Release of Burkina Faso President, Officials - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States demands that Burkina Faso's rebels immediately release President Roch Marc Christian Kabore and other government officials who were detained over the weekend, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing.

"We are aware of reports that the President of Burkina Faso has been detained by members of the country's military," Price said on Monday. "We call for the immediate release of President Kabore and other government officials and for members of the security forces to respect Burkina Faso's constitution and civilian leadership."

US citizens in the country have been advised to take shelter and monitor local media updates following the implementation of a mandatory curfew amid unstable situation.

Intense gunfire was heard on Sunday morning in two military camps in Burkina Faso's capital of Ouagadougou. One of the camps housed a prison where Gen. Gilbert Diendere and other military involved in a failed 2015 coup were held. Earlier in the day, Diendere has been freed while the president and parliamentary leader Allassane Bala Sakande, his potential successor, have been captured by mutinying soldiers.

Earlier in the day, the military rebels appeared in front of the state broadcaster's building to make a statement that they are in charge of the country and vowed to remain committed to international obligations.

Reports have been coming in on Monday that the president was removed from power and is currently held in one of General Baba Sy's garrisons in the capital city, according to the weekly Jeune Afrique.

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Biden's Call With EU Leaders Lasts 1 Hour, 20 Minutes - White House Press Pool

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's video conference call with European leaders to discuss the Ukraine crisis lasted one hour and 20 minutes, according to a White House press pool report.

"The President's secure video call with European leaders began at 3:05 p.m EST and ended at 4:25 p.m. EST," the press pool report said on Monday evening.

Earlier in the day, the White House said Biden and his European counterparts partners would be consulting and coordinating on issues related to the Ukraine crisis.

Participants in the meeting included European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Polish President Andrzej Duda and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine amid a buildup of forces near the border have sparked discussions of further US involvement in the European security situation, including by supplying more military aid to Ukraine as deterrence to a potential invasion.

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near Russia's borders are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces on its territory.

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Sherman, OSCE Chief Discuss Efforts to Peacefully Solve Ukraine Crisis - US State Dept

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid discussed by telephone the situation concerning Ukraine, including efforts to peacefully resolve the crisis, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout on Monday.

"They discussed ongoing efforts to urge Russia to pursue the path of diplomacy and de-escalation to end this crisis peacefully. Deputy Secretary Sherman reiterated strong US support for Poland's proposal, as OSCE Chair, for a revitalized security dialogue at the OSCE," Price said.

The spokesperson noted that the OSCE is an inclusive forum where all affected countries can discuss and address urgent and long-standing threats to European stability and security.

Russia has repeatedly denied the Western countries' accusations of aggressive actions along its border with Ukraine and has made clear it does not plan to attack any country.

Moreover, Moscow has pointing to NATO's military activities close to Russia's borders and has said unequivocally the alliance's plans to further expand east constitute a threat to Russia's national security and will not stand. Moscow has also said that it reserves the right to move troops within Russia's sovereign territory as it sees fit.

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Canadian Foreign Ministry Hit With Cyberattack - Reports

TORONTO, January 24 (Sputnik) - Global Affairs Canada (GAC) was the target of a multi-day cyberattack that may have been conducted by Russia or Russia-backed hackers, Global News reported citing an anonymous national security source.

GAC has been the target of a cyber attack, but it is not clear if the perpetrators, alleged to be Russians, hacked into the system or were able to merely disrupt its service, the source was quoted as saying on Monday.

Critical services for Canadians through GAC are currently functioning, but some access to services are unavailable while work is done to restore them, the report said, citing a federal Treasury Board statement.

The attack was reportedly first detected on Wednesday and there is no indication that any other government departments were impacted by the incident, the report said.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied any accusations of cyber attacks.

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US Lawmakers Urge Defense Secretary to Expedite M1A2 Tanks Transfer to Poland - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Representatives overseeing the US House Armed Services Committee sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to speed up the transfer of M1A2 Abrams tanks to Poland to reinforce NATO amid Russia's alleged efforts to destabilize Eastern Europe.

"We write to you today concerning Russian efforts to destabilize eastern Europe and the need to respond by expeditiously reinforcing NATO's eastern flank," the letter said. "Specifically, and to this end, we urge you to expedite the Congressional Notification, Foreign Military Sale, and transfer of M1A2 Abrams tanks to our steadfast ally Poland."

The letter was signed by Mike Rogers, Ranking Member of the US House Armed Services Committee, Mike Turner, Ranking Member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and Lisa McClain.

The lawmakers said expedited provisions of this capability would send an "important message" to both NATO and Kremlin as Russia builds up its forces around Ukraine.

In addition, equipping Poland with the M1A2 tank would help to displace Soviet-era equipment and enhance interoperability with the United States and NATO forces while strengthening the US industrial base, the lawmakers also said.

Tensions between Moscow and Western countries escalated amid allegations of Moscow's military build-up to invade Ukraine. On Sunday, a senior US State Department official said that Russia could start military actions against Ukraine at any moment.

Russia has repeatedly denied the Western accusations pointing to NATO's military activities close to Russia's borders that Moscow consider a threat to the country's national security.

Russia's has said it does not plan to attack any country threat and it reserves the right to move troops within its sovereign territory.

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Attacks on UAE, Saudi Arabia Represent Escalation of Yemen Conflict - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The recent attacks on the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia by the Houthis as well as retaliation airstrikes in Yemen escalate the ongoing conflict and exacerbate humanitarian situation in Yemen, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing.

"The United States condemns the overnight attack by the Houthis on the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which resulted in civilian injuries in Saudi Arabia and follows a similar Houthi incursion last week that killed three civilians in Abu Dhabi," Price said on Monday. "These attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as recent airstrikes in Yemen that killed civilians, represent a troubling escalation that only exacerbates the suffering of the Yemeni people."

Price pointed out that the Yemeni people are in urgent need of a diplomatic solution to the ongoing conflict and reaffirmed the US commitment to help strengthen the defense of the Saudi and Emirati partners.

Houthis recently targeted Abu Dhabi with drone attacks, killing three and injuring six others. In response to Houthi recent drone attacks, the Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE, launched a campaign against the group, targeting their warehouses and other infrastructure in Yemen.

On Friday, the Houthi rebels said that dozens of people were killed and injured as a result of the coalition airstrike on the prison in the Saada province. Initial reports mentioned 70 fatalities and more than 130 injured.

Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement for over six years. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and bomber drones on Saudi territory. The United Nations has described the situation in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

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US F-35 Jet Crash Lands in South China Sea, Pilot Ejects Safely - Navy

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A US F-35 jet has crash landed in the South China Sea, but the pilot safely ejected from the aircraft and was evacuated by a military helicopter, the US Navy said in a release.

"An F-35C Lightning II, assigned to Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 2, had a landing mishap on deck while USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) was conducting routine flight operations in the South China Sea, Jan. 24, 2022. The pilot safely ejected from the aircraft and was recovered via US military helicopter," the release said on Monday.

The US Navy said in the release that the pilot is in stable condition.

However, seven sailors were injured in the result of the incident, the release said.

The condition of three of sailors required being evacuated to a medical treatment facility in Manila in the Philippines. The other four sailors were treated by on-board medical personnel.

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US Will Not Be Involved in Normandy Format Meeting Between Russia, Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is not expected to be involved in the upcoming Normandy format meeting between Russia and Ukraine in Paris on Wednesday, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said.

"I do not expect any American involvement in that," Price said during a press briefing on Monday. "We do believe that diplomacy is the best path forward and we're prepared to support dialogue and diplomacy that serves to de-escalate tensions, so we are supportive of those efforts that are undertaken on the part of the Russian Federation in good faith."

The Normandy format talks were established on June 6, 2014, when the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine met on the 70th anniversary of the landing of allied forces in Normandy during World War II. The group was established to discuss paths to resolve the Donbas conflict in eastern Ukraine.

The Russian delegation to the meetings will be represented by Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak. On January 6, Kozak met for consultations with his French and German counterparts in Russia's Arkhangelskoye Palace, during which the sides agreed on the revival of the Normandy format talks.

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Pentagon Says It's Clear Russia Has No Intention to De-Escalate Now

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Monday that Russia allegedly does not have intentions to de-escalate tensions in Eastern Europe.

"It's very clear that the Russians have no intention right now of de-escalating," Kirby said during a press briefing regarding the Ukraine crisis.

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near its borders are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces within Russia's sovereign territory.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * The United States has never ruled out the option of providing additional military assistance to Ukraine if the conflict with Russia escalates, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.
- * Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) Secretary Oleksiy Danilov asked the media to "reduce the heat" regarding the security situation in the country and to avoid inciting panic.
- * EU foreign ministers see no need to take any measures to evacuate staff from Ukraine, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.
- * Warsaw is considering the possibility of providing military assistance to Kiev, but not sending a military contingent to the country, the head of the Polish presidency's National Security Bureau, Pawel Soloch, said,
- * Negotiations of political advisers of the Normandy format will be held on January 26 in Paris, a source in the Russian delegation confirmed to Sputnik.

US POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA

- * US President Joe Biden will discuss diplomacy, deterrence and pending sanctions against Russia during talks with the European Union leaders later in the day, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.
- * Biden remains open to the leader-to-leader diplomacy with Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, there is nothing to preview at present, Psaki said.
- * Biden will discuss diplomacy, deterrence and pending sanctions against Russia during talks with the European Union leaders later in the day, Psaki said.
- * The United States is interested in finding a diplomatic solution with Russia over Ukraine, not a full-blown confrontation, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said.

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GUARANTEES PROPOSALS

- * NATO's response to Russia's proposal on a non-expansion commitment is that the doors of the alliance will remain open, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said following talks in Brussels with the foreign ministers of Sweden and Finland.
- * Russia expects a written response from the United States to its proposals on security guarantees this week, as well as a separate one from NATO, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that the United States had notified Brussels about the contents of its written response to Russia concerning Moscow's demand for legally binding security guarantee.

COUP IN BURKINA FASO

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply concerned about the situation in Burkina Faso and condemns any forceful takeover of power following the coup d'etat there, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

* The military in Burkina Faso said in a televised address that President Roch Marc Kaboré was no longer exercising his powers.

* Moscow is concerned about the deterioration of the situation in Burkina Faso and is closely following the recent developments in the country, hoping for an urgent stabilization, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

GLOBAL ECONOMY

* Wall Street's Big Tech sector hit a seven-month low on Monday as highly-valued stocks that used to be the darling of investors continue to reel from a sell-off triggered by US interest rate hike fears and the possibility of a war in Ukraine.

* The Russian stock market decreased almost 6% in the main trading on Monday, Moscow Exchange data showed.

SHOOTING INCIDENT IN GERMANY

* Four people were injured as a result of a shooting in a university lecture hall in Germany's Heidelberg town, but there is no danger at the moment, the Mannheim police said on Monday.

* One of those wounded in a shooting at a university in Germany's Heidelberg died from injuries, DPA reported, citing sources.

* The German police proceed from the assumption that the shooter in the lecture hall in Heidelberg acted alone, a police spokesperson said.

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Pentagon Says Continues to Back Diplomatic Efforts to De-Escalate Ukraine Crisis

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon continues to support diplomatic efforts to defuse tensions in the Ukraine crisis despite heightening military readiness to respond to an escalation, spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"The Department continues to support diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Now as the President [Joe Biden] has said, even as we continue to prioritize diplomacy and dialogue, we must also increase readiness. In support of its obligations to the security and defense of NATO and the security of its citizens abroad, at the direction of the president and following recommendations made by Secretary [Lloyd] Austin, the United States has taken steps to heighten the readiness of its forces at home and abroad so that they

are prepared to respond to a range of contingencies including support to NATO Response Force if it is activated."

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US Open to Additional In-Person Engagements With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is open to more in-person engagements with the Russian Federation should such engagements prove useful to the path of diplomacy and dialogue, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday. "We are open to additional engagement, in-person engagements, should it prove useful, if we think it could be constructive, if we think it should be the next element as we pursue the path of dialogue and diplomacy," Price said during a press briefing.

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US Reduces Extension of General Licenses for Russia's Gaz Group - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department reduced extension of general licenses for Russia's Gaz group, Reuters reported on Monday, citing a senior Treasury official.

The licenses, previously issued for one year, can be extended for only 90 days starting next Wednesday, the official said.

The United States imposed sanctions on the GAZ Group last April, but has since issued several general licenses allowing US investors to continue conducting limited transactions with the Russian auto-maker.

The GAZ Group is part of Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska's business empire. The United States targeted the automaker along with Deripaska's companies Rusal and EN+ Group over what Washington has described as Russia's "malign activities" in Ukraine.

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US Ready to Send Troops to Europe in 5 Days in Event of Ukraine Escalation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to deploy its extra troops to Europe within five days if any escalation takes place in Ukraine, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"They are just being notified today," Kirby told a press briefing. "Some of these units are already, just by nature of who they are and where they are, on shortened tether you know that. What the Secretary decided to do in many of these cases is [to] shorten it even more. So, from in some cases 10 days prepared to deploy - you've got to be able to go in 10 days - to now five. It depends on the unit but they will have to make whatever preparations they feel they need to make to be able to meet that five-day commitment."

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'Super-Emitters' in US Permian Basin Leaked Methane for Years - Environmental Group

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Data from airborne surveys reveal more than two dozen pipelines, processing plants, and other facilities in the US states of Texas and New Mexico have been releasing large amounts of methane pollution for years, the Environmental Defense Fund said on Monday.

"The data reveals that about 30 facilities - including pipelines, well pads, compressor stations and processing facilities - persistently emitted large volumes of methane over multiple years, and that repairing those leaks could immediately reduce 100,000 metric tons of methane per year," the group said in a press release linked to data tracked by Carbon Mapper. "The mitigation of these 30 super-emitters would prevent \$26 million a year in wasted gas."

The Environmental Defense Fund and Carbon Mapper said the 30 facilities, which comprise less than .001% of the Permian Basin's oil and gas facilities, produce as much "near-term climate pollution" as about 500,000 passenger vehicles.

The insights, the release added, were generated from airborne surveys conducted between 2019 and 2021 using advanced remote sensing technology to track emissions from oil and gas production facilities.

In all, the Carbon Mapper research team discovered more than 1,000 super emitters in the area. The Permian Basin is an oil-and-gas-producing area located in West Texas and southeastern New Mexico. According to the Railroad Commission of Texas, it is about 300 miles long and 250 miles wide with more than 7,000 fields.

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Pentagon Looking for Signs of Russia's 'Imminent Incursion' Into Ukraine But Sees None Yet

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking for indications of an imminent Russian advance into Ukraine but does not see any yet, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Monday.

"We're mindful of things that the Russians could do that would potentially give us indications of some sort of imminent incursion," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We're not there yet but we're watching for those indicators very closely."

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near its borders are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces within Russia's sovereign territory.

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Pentagon Says NATO's Decision Will Trigger Deployment of Extra US Forces to Europe

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A potential deployment of additional American forces, which have been put on high alert in the US, to Europe over Ukraine tensions will depend on a decision by NATO, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"What would engender a deployment order to them would be a decision by NATO to activate the NRF [NATO response force]," Kirby told a press briefing. "That's a NATO decision."

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James Webb Telescope Reaches Final Stable Position 1Mln Miles From Earth - NASA (Updates with additional information in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) successfully fired a planned rocket on-course correction to maneuver itself into a permanent stable position at a Lagrange point between the Earth and the Sun, almost one million miles from its home planet, NASA announced on Monday.

"Today, at 2:00 p.m. EST, Webb fired its onboard thrusters for nearly five minutes (297 seconds) to complete the final post-launch course correction to Webb's trajectory," NASA said in a blog report. "This mid-course correction burn inserted Webb toward its final orbit around the second Sun-Earth Lagrange point, or L2, nearly 1 million miles away from the Earth."

The final mid-course burn added only about 3.6 miles per hour (1.6 meters per second) to Webb's speed, which was all that was needed to send it to its preferred "halo" orbit around the L2 point, NASA said.

"Webb has used as little propellant as possible for course corrections while it travels out to the realm of L2, to leave as much remaining propellant as possible for Webb's ordinary operations over its lifetime: station-keeping (small adjustments to keep Webb in its desired orbit) and momentum unloading (to counteract the effects of solar radiation pressure on the sunshield)," NASA added.

Lagrange points are positions in space where objects sent there tend to stay put. At such points, the gravitational pull of two large masses precisely equals the centripetal force required for a small object to move with them. These points in space can be used by spacecraft to reduce fuel consumption needed to remain in position, according to NASA.

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US Centers for Disease Control Lists 15 More States for Americans to Avoid Due to COVID-19

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Monday added 15 more countries on its list of places for Americans to avoid due to high novel coronavirus risks.

"Avoid travel to Colombia," the CDC said in one of the identically-worded travel alerts for the 15 countries, including Costa Rica, Fiji, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Kuwait, Mongolia, Niger, Peru, Romania, Saint Bartholomey, Saint Martin, Dominican Republic, United Arab Emirates and Tunisia.

Americans wishing to travel to the 15 countries listed must be "fully vaccinated before travel," the CDC said, adding that "even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 variants."

The CDC also urged travelers to follow recommendations or requirements in the 15 countries, including wearing a mask and staying six feet apart from other individuals.

The agency's travel alerts are usually for countries regarded to be on Level 4 for coronavirus infections, signifying "very high" risk.

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Beijing Has No Legal Basis for South China Sea Claims - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - China has not provided any legal basis for its claims in the South China Sea, the acting US deputy assistant secretary of state for oceans, fisheries, and polar affairs said on Monday.

Earlier in January, the US Department of State released a study report alleging that China has long asserted "unlawful" maritime claims in the South China Sea. The department argued that China's claim of a wide swathe of the South China Sea is inconsistent with the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention.

"The United States reiterates that China has not offered any legal basis to support its maritime claims," Constance Arvis told a briefing.

According to Arvis, the US continues to call on China to cease its coercive activities. She said that China's claims in the South China Sea have no basis in international law.

Meanwhile, Jung Pak, deputy assistant secretary of state, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, added that Washington is committed to the region and will uphold the rights of allies and partners.

"US and Japan very much committed to freedom of navigation, other lawful uses of the sea," she stressed.

Beijing has been disputing for decades the status of a number of territories in the South China Sea to which it lays claim, primarily the Paracel and Spratly islands, and the Scarborough Shoal. China considers the Spratly archipelago to be its territory, despite the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling which said there was no legal basis for China's maritime claims. The arbitration proceeding was initiated by the Philippines in January of 2013.

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Bulk of 8,500 US Troops on High Alert Over Ukraine Crisis Will Be Ground Forces - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A majority of the 8,500 US troops placed on high alert over the Ukraine crisis will be ground forces, Pentagon spokesperson said on Monday.

"Yes, I think the bulk of them would be considered ground forces," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said these 8,500 troops on high alert are from brigade combat teams, medical personnel, aviation support, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. No deployment orders have been sent and no missions have been assigned, Kirby added.

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White House Has No Comment on LPR, DPR Recognition Initiative - Psaki

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has no comment at present on the initiative to recognize the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR), White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"I haven't spoken with our national security team about that," Psaki said during a press briefing. "I don't have any other comment at this point in time."

The council of the Russian parliament's lower house decided to consider the appeal of the Communist Party faction on recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR in February, the faction's first deputy head Nikolai Kolomeytsev told Sputnik on Monday.

On Wednesday, Communist Party lawmakers published a draft appeal of the State Duma to the Russian president asking him to consider recognizing the DPR and LPR as independent states, as well as to conduct negotiations with their leaders as soon as possible in order to create the legal basis for interstate relations and to regulate all aspects of cooperation and mutual assistance.

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Pentagon Says No Decision Yet on Moving Trainers Out of Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has not made any decision about withdrawing its military trainers from Ukraine amid growing tensions with Russia, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"There has been no decision about moving our trainers that are in Ukraine out," Kirby told a press briefing. "But as I said many times we are constantly looking at the situation. We are going to do what's right for their safety and security."

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Pentagon Not Ruling Out US Troops' Intra-Theater Moves Over Ukraine Crisis - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is not ruling out the option to move US troops in the European theater in order to bolster NATO's eastern flank amid the Ukraine crisis, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"I'm absolutely not ruling out the possibility that there will intra-theater moves as well inside Europe to bolster NATO allies on the Eastern flank," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Considering Re-Designating Houthis as Terrorist Group - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering re-designating the Houthis movement in Yemen as a terrorist organization amid an increase in attacks carried out by the group, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"[Biden] said that the question of the potential re-designation of Ansar Allah, the name for the Houthi movement, is under consideration," Price said during a press briefing. "We have issued sanctions on key leaders and designations on key leaders in recent months, and we will continue to call upon all appropriate tools in our toolkit to hold those Houthi leaders responsible for these attacks accountable."

Houthis recently targeted Abu Dhabi with drone attacks, killing three and injuring six others. In response to Houthi recent drone attacks, the Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE, launched a campaign against the group, targeting their warehouses and other infrastructure in Yemen.

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James Webb Telescope Reaches Final Stable Position 1Mln Miles From Earth - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) successfully fired a planned rocket on-course correction to maneuver itself into a permanent stable position at a Lagrange point between the Earth and the Sun, almost one million miles from its home planet, NASA announced on Monday.

"Today, at 2:00 p.m. EST, Webb fired its onboard thrusters for nearly five minutes (297 seconds) to complete the final post-launch course correction to Webb's trajectory," NASA said in a blog report. "This mid-course correction burn inserted Webb toward its final orbit around the second Sun-Earth Lagrange point, or L2, nearly 1 million miles away from the Earth."

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UN Chief Hopes to See 'Diplomatic Buildup' Over Ukraine, More Dialogue - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres would like to see an increase in diplomatic efforts and more dialogue as Russia-Ukraine tensions mount, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"What the secretary-general would like to see is a diplomatic buildup, increasing number of dialogue and the reaffirmation by all [those] involved that there can only be a diplomatic solution," Dujarric told a press briefing.

He added that Guterres continues to be concerned about current tensions and appeals to all parties involved to take immediate steps to de-escalate and remain focused on the diplomatic process.

A new turn in the Ukraine crisis has taken shape over the past several months after Russia was accused of a troop build-up near the shared border and allegedly preparing for an invasion. Moscow has denied these accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security.

NATO has four multinational battalion-size battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, as well as a forward-presence in Romania. As tensions have grown in the past days, the allies said they would boost their presence on the eastern border, including by sending fighter jets to Lithuania and Bulgaria.

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US Intercepted 2 Missiles Targeting Base Near Abu Dhabi in Latest Houthi Attack - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States successfully intercepted two missiles on Monday targeting Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, the Central Command (CENTCOM) said.

Earlier on Monday, the Houthi movement launched a ballistic missile attack against the Al Dhafra military base and said it is ready to expand its operation against the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The UAE defense ministry said the country's air defense systems successfully repelled the attack.

"US forces at Al Dhafra Air Base, near Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), engaged two inbound missile threats with multiple Patriot interceptors coincident to efforts by the armed

forces of the UAE in the early morning hours of Jan[uary] 24, 2022," CENTCOM said in a press release. "The combined efforts successfully prevented both missiles from impacting the base." There were no American casualties in the attack, the release said, adding that the air base houses about 2,000 US service members and personnel.

US forces at Al Dhafra Air Base are ready to respond to any new attacks, release said.

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US House Speaker Asks for All-Member, Bipartisan Briefing on Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has requested a briefing for all lawmakers from the Biden administration on the situation between Ukraine and Russia, the Washington Post reported on Monday.

Pelosi has asked the White House for an all-member, bipartisan briefing on the Ukraine-Russia situation, Washington Post reporter Ashley Parker said via Twitter.

On Thursday, Pelosi announced upcoming legislation to impose economic sanctions on Russia to deter or punish a possible invasion of Ukraine.

The US House Democratic leaders are preparing additional legislation to increase assistance to Ukraine and support NATO as a way to increase and coordinate pressure on Russia, Pelosi added.

Discussions of imposing additional sanctions against Russia and providing military assistance to Ukraine have occurred in both the House and Senate recently following increased European security tensions near the Ukrainian border.

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near its are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces within Russia's sovereign territory.

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Biden Remain Open to Leader-to-Leader Diplomacy With Putin - White House

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden remains open to the leader-to-leader diplomacy with Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, there is nothing to preview at present, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Monday.

"The President remains open to leader-to-leader diplomacy of course," Psaki said when asked about a possible talks over the telephone between the two leaders. "He knows how effective that can be, but I don't have anything to predict or preview at this point in time in terms a call between them."

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US Prepared to Meet Directly With Iran to Advance Nuclear Deal Negotiations - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to meet directly with Iran to advance ongoing Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said that Tehran may consider holding the direct talks if it helps reach a better deal.

"We are prepared to meet directly. We have long held the position that it would be more productive to engage with Iran directly, on both JCPOA negotiations and other issues. This extends to bilateral and multilateral formats," the State Department spokesperson said. A direct meeting would enable more efficient communication between the US and Iran, which is urgently needed to reach an understanding on a mutual return to JCPOA compliance, the spokesperson added.

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Reports About Russian Embassy in US Evacuating Diplomats 'Utter Lie' - Ambassador (Updates with more details, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The reports that Russia has started evacuating diplomats from its embassy in Washington, DC and from other diplomatic facilities is completely false, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday.

"This is an utter lie," Antonov said when asked about reports claiming the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC has started evacuating diplomats in connection with the situation in Ukraine.

"All of us in Washington, New York and Houston are working as usual."

Antonov emphasized that the Russian Embassy in the United States has not received instructions from Moscow or requests from the US State Department for diplomats to leave the country.

"We continue to carry out our diplomatic duties," Antonov said. "The main task for this week is to get written answers from the US side to the Russian proposals on the two documents regarding security guarantees, the implementation of which will allow to stabilize the situation in Europe."

On Monday, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany joined the United States in encouraging at least some of their diplomatic personnel and family members to leave Ukraine over a potential security threat. The citizens of these countries staying in Ukraine have been advised to return on commercial flights.

The European Union characterized the decision as being "dramatic," saying its diplomats will continue to work in Kiev.

The United States and NATO continue to accuse Russia of preparing an invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying it has no intention to attack any country.

In addition, Russia has pointed to NATO's increased military activities near its borders, saying additional expansion eastward such as in Ukraine constitute a threat to Russia's national security and can not be tolerated.

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US Never Ruled Out Providing Assistance to Ukraine if Situation Escalates - White House

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has never ruled out the option of providing additional military assistance to Ukraine if the conflict with Russia escalates, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"We have always said we would reinforce our allies on the eastern flank and those conversations and discussions have certainly been part of what our national security officials have been discussing with their counterparts for several weeks. In fact, we have never ruled out the option of providing assistance or additional assistance in advance of an invasion," Psaki said when asked whether President Joe Biden has made a final decision about deploying more US troops to Eastern Europe.

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Biden to Discuss Deterrence, Sanctions Against Russia During Talks With EU - White House

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will discuss diplomacy, deterrence and pending sanctions against Russia during talks with the European Union leaders later in the day, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"During that conversation, we expect they will discuss diplomacy, deterrence and defense efforts," Psaki said during a press briefing. "And certainly the discussion about the pending sanctions or discussion of that we would expect to be part of that as well - on Biden's call today."

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UN Chief Follows Developments in Burkina Faso Amid Coup With Deep Concern - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply concerned about the situation in Burkina Faso and condemns any forceful takeover of power following the coup d'etat there, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"The Secretary-General is following developments in Burkina Faso with deep concern. He's particularly worried about the whereabouts and safety of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, as well as the worsening security situation following the coup carried out on January 23 by sections of the armed forces," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "The Secretary-General strongly condemns any attempted takeover of government by the force of arms."

Guterres also calls on the coup leaders to ensure the protection of the country's president and urges all actors to show restraint and commit to dialogue to find solutions to the challenges in the country, Dujarric said.

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Reports Russian Embassy in US Evacuating Diplomats 'Utter Lie' - Ambassador

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"This is an utter lie," Antonov said when asked whether the reports claiming the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC has started evacuating diplomats in connection with the situation regarding Ukraine. "All of us in Washington, New York and Houston are working as usual."

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DHS Claims Russia May Mount Cyberattack on US Amid Ukraine Tensions – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – Russia may conduct a cyberattack on the United States if it concludes that its national security is threatened as a result of a US or NATO response to a potential escalation of the Ukraine conflict, CNN reported on Monday, citing a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) intelligence bulletin.

On Sunday, DHS distributed a memo to critical infrastructure operators and state and local governments in the US, warning them of potential cyber threats.

"Russia maintains a range of offensive cyber tools that it could employ against US networks—from low-level denials-of-service to destructive attacks targeting critical infrastructure," the DHS memo, obtained by the broadcaster, said.

At the same time, the authors of the document believe that the threshold for the use of Russia's cyber arsenal against the US "probably remains very high."

"[W]e have not observed Moscow directly employ these types of cyber attacks against US critical infrastructure—notwithstanding cyber espionage and potential prepositioning operations in the past," the memo said.

The US and NATO continue to accuse Russia of preparing a military invasion of Ukraine. Moscow denies the claims and points to the alliance's increased military activities near Russian borders, while waiting for a response to its proposals to Washington and NATO on security guarantees in Europe.

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US Restaurant Industry Pleads for Help From Congress to Avoid Bankruptcy - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Congress must take urgent action to provide major financial support in order to prevent widespread bankruptcies and loss of jobs in the restaurant industry, the National Association of Restaurants (NAR) said in a letter to congressional leaders on Monday.

"The restaurant industry is at an inflection point," the letter to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Republican House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said. "Alarmingly, the industry still hasn't recreated the more than 650,000 jobs lost early in the pandemic, a loss 45% more than the next closest industry."

Two years into the coronavirus pandemic, restaurants are still struggling to keep their doors open amid restrictive measures, inflation, a labor shortage and supply chain delays, the letter said.

"While the restaurant industry appreciates the support it received from Congress in the Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF) at the pandemic's onset, new data from our 10th COVID-19 Operators Survey show that restaurant recovery is paralyzed and nowhere near complete. Congress must act now to replenish the RRF," the letter added.

A recent survey revealed that 88% of restaurants experienced a decline in customer demand for indoor on-premises dining because of the omicron variant, 76% of operators report that business conditions are worse now than three months ago and 74% say their restaurant is less profitable now than it was before the pandemic, according to the letter.

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Rashida Tlaib, Allies Urge New Law to Ban Congress Members From Owning Stocks - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Rep. Rashida Tlaib and three other legislators, one fellow Democrat and two Republicans, have called on the leaders of Congress to prohibit all members of the body from owning any stocks traded on Wall Street while they serve, they said in a letter sent to the Senate and House leaders on Monday.

"We are writing to urge you to swiftly bring legislation to prohibit members of Congress from owning or trading stocks, such as the Ban Conflicted Trading Act or the TRUST in Congress

Act, to the House floor," the members of Congress wrote in their letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

Congress passed the STOCK Act in 2012 in an attempt to prevent members of the institution from using congressional knowledge to their advantage in stock trading. However, one recent investigation found that the STOCK Act has been violated hundreds of times just since 2020, the letter noted.

"This common-sense, bipartisan legislation is unfortunately necessary in light of recent misconduct, and is supported by Americans across the political spectrum. Both of you have recently addressed this issue in public comments, but this glaring problem will not go away until it is fixed and Congress should not delay when we have the power to fix it," the members wrote. In 2020, senators from both parties made significant stock sales after receiving closed briefings on the emergence of COVID-19. According to recent polling, 76% of Americans including 70% of Democrats, 78% of Republicans, and 80% of independents say that members of Congress should not be allowed to trade stocks, the letter added.

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Trump Says Russia-Ukraine Situation Would Have Never Happened Under His Administration

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The ongoing situation between Russia and Ukraine would not have occurred under the Trump administration, former US President Donald Trump said on Monday.

"What's happening with Russia and Ukraine would never have happened under the Trump administration. Not even a possibility," Trump said in a statement.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine amid a buildup of forces near the border have sparked discussions of further US involvement in the European security situation, including by supplying great military aid to Ukraine as deterrence to a potential invasion.

Russia has resolutely denied that it intends to attack any country and has warned NATO that its activities near Russia's borders are a national security threat while Moscow reserves the right to move forces on its territory.

The Trump administration requested in its fiscal year 2021 budget some \$317 million in aid to Ukraine, including providing military assistance, and later it did provide \$1.5 million in assistance to improve Ukraine's special operations forces training facilities.

However, the US House of Representatives in December of 2019 also voted to impeach Trump for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress for allegedly freezing military aid to Ukraine in order to press Kiev to probe political rival Joe Biden. The Senate then acquitted Trump on all articles of impeachment.

Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in July of 2020 during testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Trump administration supported increasing lethal aid to Ukraine.

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Foreign Minister Baerbock Says Ashamed by Rise of Anti-Semitism in Germany

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Monday that she is ashamed that anti-semitism is on the rise in Germany.

"As German Foreign Minister and as a German citizen, I am ashamed by the rise of anti-semitism in my country," Baerbock said, referring to increased instances of hate speech, harassment and attacks against Jews. "All of this is unbearable."

Baerbock emphasized Germany will respond to such acts with the full force of the law.

"In the coming years, we will be spending one billion euro on fighting anti-semitism and group-related hatred with projects ranging from police training to social media campaigns," she said.

Baerbock also said that the new German government is firmly committed to preserving the memory of the Holocaust today and in the future, including by supporting museums and by stepping up the fight against Holocaust distortion.

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Opening Arguments Begin Civil Rights Trial of 3 Ex-Officers Linked to George Floyd Murder

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The federal civil rights trial against three former Minneapolis police officers present alongside Derek Chauvin during the murder of black man George Floyd began on Monday with opening arguments from the legal teams, a local CBS affiliate reported.

Former officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao are being tried on federal civil rights charges including deprivation of rights under color of law for allegedly neglecting to aid Floyd during his murder by Chauvin in May 2020.

"In your custody is in your care," prosecutors reportedly said in their opening statement, referring to the officers' alleged responsibility in Floyd's murder.

Chauvin in December pleaded guilty to the federal civil rights violations brought against him as part of a plea agreement with prosecutors. Chauvin is currently serving a state sentence of 22.5 years for murdering Floyd, and faces an additional 240-300 months served concurrently for the civil rights charges.

Kueng, Lane and Thao in September requested their trial be separated from Chauvin's over concerns about receiving a fair trial. The three former officers will also face separate state criminal charges in March.

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Biden, European Leaders to Discuss Ukraine Crisis on Monday - White House

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a video conference call with European leaders on Monday afternoon to discuss Russia-Ukraine tensions, the White House said.

"In the afternoon, the President will hold a secure video call with European leaders as part of our close consultation and coordination with our Transatlantic Allies and partners in response to Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders," the White House said in a press release.

The virtual meeting will include European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Polish President Andrzej Duda, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

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Wall Street Tech Stocks Hit 7-Month Lows on Ukraine Conflict, US Rate Hike Fears

(Updates with comment, context in paras 3-11)

NEW YORK, January 24 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech sector hit a seven-month low on Monday morning as highly-valued stocks that used to be the darling of investors continue to reel from a selloff triggered by US interest rate hike fears and the possibility of a war in Ukraine. The Nasdaq Composite index featuring technology icons such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google broke below 14,000 points for the first time since June, for a month- and year-to-date loss of almost 15%. At the rate the selloff is going, January might end up an even worse month than October 2008, when the index lost 17% at the height of the financial crisis.

"It could be a make or break week for the markets, with the Fed meeting on Wednesday, big tech earnings, and ongoing tensions on the Ukraine/Russia border," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "That may sound a bit over the top given how deep a correction we've already seen, particularly in the Nasdaq, but it could get much worse before it gets better."

Nasdaq is already down nearly 18% from a November record high of 16,212, putting it on track to a bear market. By trading definition, any market that drops 20% from a recent high is categorized as a bear market.

The selloff in stocks began on January 13 and accelerated in each of the past five sessions as the Federal Reserve prepares to raise US interest rate for the first time in two years and as the Ukraine conflict worsened, with NATO allies putting forces on standby and sending additional ships and fighter jets to eastern Europe for a potential conflict with Russia.

Amid this, fourth-quarter earnings of US companies that began streaming in last week have been disappointing for Nasdaq-related stocks.

"Wednesday is going to be massive," Erlam said. "The Fed needs to strike the right balance between taking inflation seriously and not wanting to cause further unnecessary turmoil in the

markets. Not an easy balancing act when four hikes are already priced in, alongside balance sheet reduction, and some are arguing it's not enough."

The Federal Reserve slashed US interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, and has kept them there since to aid recovery.

As a result, the US Consumer Price Index grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982, after trillions of dollars of relief spending by the government, higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Fed now says it may have to execute a series of rate hikes to counter such inflation.

The economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic.

The US economy itself is projected to grow by 4% in 2022, after an estimated 5.5% for last year, the Fed says. In 2020, the economy contracted 3.5% due to business shutdowns and other inactivity forced by the pandemic.

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US Supreme Court to Review Cases of College Admissions Favoring Minority Students - Order

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The Supreme Court of the United States has agreed to review its decision from 2003 holding that favoring students from certain minority groups during admissions to colleges does not violate US Constitution, according to a court document published on Monday.

"The petitions for writs of certiorari are granted," the Supreme Court document said.

The Supreme Court combined two petitions from the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) to the University of North Carolina (UNC) and Harvard University into one case.

The two appeals to the oldest public college and oldest private college in the United States were filed on the same day and asked the court to overrule its decision in the Grutter v. Bollinger case, which authorized US universities to use race as a factor in admissions process.

SFFA claims that University of North Carolina and Harvard award racial preferences to African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans identifying them as "underrepresented minorities" and consider the applicants' race at every stage in the admission process, according to the petition.

In both cases, SFFA accuses the universities of engaging in race balancing and ignoring race-neutral alternatives while penalizing other minorities, including Asian-American applicants, the petition said.

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US Interested in Diplomacy With Russia Over Ukraine, Not Confrontation - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is interested in finding a diplomatic solution with Russia over Ukraine, not a full-blown confrontation, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

"We want to find a solution at the negotiating and diplomatic table and not a full-fledged confrontation," Thomas-Greenfield told a press briefing.

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US Finalizing Process of Identifying Units to Send to Europe to Deter Russia - Reports
WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is finalizing the process of identifying the specific military units that will be deployed to Europe to counter Russia and is writing up military orders, CNN reported on Monday.

While the administration has not yet made a final decision, President Joe Biden reportedly discussed options with top defense officials over the weekend to increase the number of US troops in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, the report said.

Earlier on Monday, The New York Times reported that Biden is considering deploying US troops to NATO member states in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. Defense Department reportedly introduced several possible scenarios of scaling up US military presence, including dispatching 1,000 to 5,000 troops to Eastern Europe, with the potential to increase that number tenfold if the situation deteriorates.

NATO pledged to reinforce allied deterrence and defense amid rising fears of military escalation in Ukraine by dispatching additional ships and fighter jets to the alliance's deployment sites in Eastern Europe.

The US aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman strike group came under NATO command on Monday in the Mediterranean Sea for the first time since the Cold War during the current alliance-led Neptune Strike 2022 exercise in the Mediterranean.

Tensions around Ukraine have flared up in recent months, with the West accusing Russia of massing troops near the Ukrainian border in an alleged preparation for an invasion. Russia has dismissed the claims and reiterated that it has no intention of invading any country while reserving the right to move forces within its sovereign territory.

Russia has also raised concern over increased NATO's military activity near its borders, saying that the allegations serve as a pretext for expanding the alliance's military presence and deploying more troops in Eastern Europe.

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US Takes Steps to Ban Imports From China Allegedly Made With Uyghur Forced Labor - DHS

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US government is banning all imports from China allegedly made using forced labor from the Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced on Monday.

"The DHS announced, as part of its implementation of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), that it will seek public input to inform the Department's continued efforts to prohibit goods from being imported into the United States that are produced with forced labor in ...China, including in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," the DHS said in a Twitter message.

The UFLPA prohibits goods from being imported into the United States that are either produced in China's Xinjiang province or by certain entities identified in the forthcoming UFLPA enforcement strategy, unless the importer can prove by clear and convincing evidence that the goods were not produced with forced labor, the DHS noted.

"As part of our efforts to advance the Biden-Harris Administration's priority to eradicate forced labor from U.S. supply chains, we are taking an important first step today to implement the UFLPA," Secretary for Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said.

After receiving comments, the Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force will conduct a public hearing and develop a strategy for supporting enforcement of section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930. DHS and US Customs and Border Protection will issue guidance for importers, the department said.

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Peacekeeper Deployment to Ukraine Not Being Discussed in UN - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Nobody in the United Nations has discussed the possibility of sending UN peacekeepers to Ukraine, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

"As far as I know, no one has discussed a possibility of the UN peacekeeping force in Ukraine," she told journalists.

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US Supreme Court Rejects Republican Lawmaker's Case Against Nancy Pelosi - Order List

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court declined to hear House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy's case against Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi over a chamber rule that allows members to vote via a proxy, according to an order list released Monday.

The Supreme Court's decision not to hear the case means that an earlier federal appeals court ruling preventing the review of internal House of Representatives rules by the court system stands.

McCarthy sued Pelosi over a COVID-19 pandemic-related rule that allows lawmakers to designate another member to vote as a proxy if they are unable to physically come to the US Capitol.

McCarthy argued that the rule is unconstitutional and that the writers of the Constitution expected votes to be done in person, purportedly evidenced by the ability of an incomplete quorum to compel the attendance of absent members.

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